

I CAN'T HATE YOU ANYMORE

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SUMMARY: Being forced to marry a man you hate is not as bad as loving him after he destroyed your life. After years of heartache, will Draco and Hermione ever find true happiness?

COMPLETE INFORMATION

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I know you must be thinking, another one? Yes, this is another idea that just popped into my head one day. Dunno from where, but it was here to stay. I really have great expectations for this story and I can't wait to hear what everyone thinks about it. The title is not original because it is based on the song with the same name by Nick Lachey.

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Chapter 1: Reading The Fine Print

An empty room can be so deafening

The silence makes you wanna scream

It drives you crazy

There is a saying that when a person has a near death experience, their whole life flashes before their eyes. Hermione Granger was not dying, nor was she about to die in the literal sense, but in the figurative sense she was walking to her death.

A woman's wedding should not have been compared to death, but for her it was. She had to admit that her "fiancé" had gone all out in planning the ceremony and the reception, but she now deduced that his mother had been the one who planned every single detail. The woman was a perfectionist with too much money on her hands. A lot of people had turned up for this, but who would really miss the wedding of the century?

Who would miss seeing Hermione Granger marry Draco Malfoy?

As she walked slowly down the jade-green velvet carpet, in a dazzling white gown resembling a dress from the medieval times that hugged all the right places and trailed behind her in a long train, she felt like a bug under a microscope. Everyone's attention was focused on her.

Hermione had never been one to worry about her looks, but Narcissa Malfoy had brought in the best stylist in the wizarding world to do her hair and make-up and her dress had been custom made for her. Her hair had been pulled up into intricate twists that overflowed a crown of white roses and her eyes were accentuated to look a very light brown, almost a hazel color.

He was standing at the end of the green carpet, looking aristocratic and smug in a long tailed, all black tuxedo. If he hadn't been who he was, she would've thought that he looked very handsome. But this was Malfoy. Hermione wanted to pitch the flowers in her hand at his smirking face; her hands were itching to do it. Maybe she should just turn and leave him there at the altar in front of everyone, humiliate him the way he was humiliating her.

Her step faltered, her mind was working up the courage to actually do it, but he sensed it and he

gave her a threatening look. A look that told her that he had her in the palm of his hand and would have no qualms about squeezing the life out of her. People were starting to murmur as she stood there and stared at Malfoy. He gave her a pointed look and she swallowed hard before she started to walk towards him again.

Lucius Malfoy, who had been standing to his son's left looked faintly relieved, though he was looking just as smug as his son. For a moment he had thought that she would turn tail and flee, leaving their family name in humiliation. But she seemed to have made up her mind and gathered her courage to keep walking. He gave his wife a small smirk before they turned to see their soon-to-be-daughter-in-law reach their son.

She looked a bit green at the face and paler than usual but she was standing with her chin held high, her nose almost in the air. She would make a good Malfoy bride. Lucius wasn't stupid, he knew that having Hermione Granger the war hero, marry his son would push their name right to the very top once again. He didn't know how Draco had done it though, because by the way she was looking at his young son, she was close to cursing him into oblivion anytime soon. She really looked like she didn't want to be here.

Hermione set her jaw and let out a deep breath as the Ministry official began his formal marriage speech. She blinked back tears as she listened to his words. She wanted to die. She didn't care for this beautiful dress, or for the fancy party. The man standing at her side was not the man she was supposed to be marrying.

Up until a month ago, she had been happy and in love with Ron. Well, she was still in love with Ron, but she wasn't happy. He was the man she wanted to be with, but Ron hated her above anything now, and it was all Malfoy's fault. As the official kept talking, she tuned him out and had a flashback to when Malfoy had given her his ultimatum.

Hermione smiled to herself as she walked the path towards the backdoor of the Weasley's Burrow. Only Arthur and Molly lived here now. All the Weasley boys, with the exception of Ron and George, were now married to good women, and Ginny was living with and engaged to Harry. As Hermione approached the open door, she could hear voices coming from inside.

"..... the payment due date expired last week, ma'am. I'm afraid that we can no longer extend the inevitable," a man was saying. His voice didn't sound familiar to Hermione.

Molly's voice was high and trembling. "Arthur has almost collected all of the money! You can't do this to us now!" she exclaimed.

Hermione frowned in confusion. She normally wasn't one to eavesdrop, but this sounded very serious.

"I'm sorry Mrs. Weasley, but we found a buyer for the property. The papers have been signed and in a matter of days the property will be legally his. You will have to work something out with him. I'm very sorry ma'am, this is nothing personal. I'm just doing my job," the man said in an even tone.

"Please just leave," Molly said in a tearful voice. There was a sound of the floo being used and then quiet sobs coming from inside the house. Hermione let out a deep breath before deciding to enter.

"Molly?" she asked.

"Oh, Hermione!" Molly exclaimed, wiping at her tears and giving her a watery smile.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked worriedly.

"Were you outside for long?" Molly asked her instead.

Hermione swallowed hard and nodded. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I was on my way in when I heard you speaking with that man," she said quickly.

Molly's bottom lip trembled. "We lost the Burrow, Hermione. We took out a mortgage that we were so close to paying in full; we needed the money three years ago after the war. We were given the time to pay it back, but it's taken us time to gather the money. But time is up, so we lost the property. And now... now the new owner will probably kick us out!"

Hermione hugged her tightly, giving Molly a shoulder to cry on for the next hour. The older woman made her promise that she wouldn't tell her kids, it was too late anyways, or at least until they were ready to tell everybody what had happened. Hermione reluctantly agreed to keep things a secret, and had offered to help Molly and Arthur with anything they needed. She needed to walk for a while, to think of some way to help these people who were her second family.

As Hermione left Molly with her husband, who had only arrived ten minutes ago, she walked out of the backdoor and through the garden. When she was at a short distance, an eerie feeling raced down her spine. That feeling she had always had during the war right before they were about to get attacked. She slowly pulled out her wand and stopped. Her ears were finely attuned to the noises of the small forest and she heard a twig snap to her left.

"Come out where I can see you," she said slowly and threateningly, pointing her wand in the direction of the noise.

"Bravo, Granger," a mocking voice said from behind the large tree. Out stepped Draco Malfoy, looking like an angel of death in all black and with a smug look on his face.

Hermione pointed her wand at his head. "Why are you following me? Why are you even here?" she asked slowly.

Draco smirked joyously. There was something suspicious about the way he was looking at her and Hermione began to feel apprehension in the back of her skull even before he opened his mouth to reply. "I'm just... taking a look at my new property," he said evilly, deliberately slowly.

Hermione's eyes went wide. "What?! You're the person who—no, that's impossible!" she said angrily.

He gave her a bored look as he leaned against the tree. "You heard correctly. This property belongs to me now and I was just thinking about what I should do with it. You know, I always wanted my very own Quidditch pitch, one even bigger than the one at Hogwarts," he said cheerily.

Hermione was feeling the need to curse the little bastard to oblivion. "You would throw them out of their home? For a sodding Quidditch pitch?" she asked incredulously.

Draco gave her a scrutinizing look, but she hardly noticed as she kept rambling on.

"They have lived here for years, and their children grew up here! You can't just throw them out! Have some decency for the first time in your life!" she exclaimed.

Just that last little comment angered him above anything. He took a step forward, and she subconsciously took one back, mentally kicking herself. The last thing she wanted was to let this man think that he intimidated her. She shivered in disgust when his eyes slid over her from head to toe. The look was disturbing and she felt strangely violated.

"What would you be willing to do for Weasel's parents?" he asked slyly, his eyes lingering on her cleavage.

Hermione didn't even bother hiding her disgust for him. "Keep dreaming, scum bag," she spat, crossing her arms over her chest.

"Hear me out Granger. You want to help the Weasley's? Keep them in their home for many more years to come? Then I suggest you listen because I have no qualms about throwing them out on their arses, but I know that you're too much of a bleeding heart to let that happen. I've been watching you for a long time, Granger, and there is something that I want above anything in this world," Draco admitted.

She started to shake her head. "No. Whatever it is, the answer is no." She knew exactly what a man like Malfoy would want. He'd shag her and then tell Ron, killing two birds with one stone. Humiliating Ron and degrading her.

"It's really simple. Either you do what I tell you, or the Weasley's lose their home."

"You're blackmailing me, you piece of shit?" she snarled, jabbing her wand against his neck.

Draco hissed. She better not have bruised him, or there would be hell to pay. He had kept his wand in his sleeve, not making a move for it so that she wouldn't feel threatened, but if she kept poking him, he would be forced to bring it out.

"For those people I would do anything, even give up my life. I would do anything except sleep with you," she growled, jabbing harder.

Draco gave her a superior look. "This goes beyond a simple shag," he muttered. "If you want these people to stay in their home, without any problem whatsoever, you will leave Weasley and marry me," Draco told her seriously.

Hermione felt as if she had been sucker punched. This wasn't happening to her. She had stumbled into the freaking twilight zone. "You are out of your mind!" she yelled, taking a step back and contemplating if she murdered him now, how long it would take the Ministry to find his body.

"I'm serious," he said slowly. "In order to leave these people alone, all I want is you. I'll give you a few days to think about it. If I don't have an answer by Friday, I will personally throw them out

and tear down the house before their very eyes," he said, taking a step back.

"And you would live with yourself after taking their home?" she asked softly.

He shrugged. "I can, but will you? I can give you all you need, Granger. More than Weasley will ever be able to afford."

Hermione gave him a look of pure loathing. "I'm not for sale, Malfoy. I don't care how rich you are or what you can provide for me. Never in my life would I deign to marry a man like you."

Draco shrugged. "I told you what I want. If you don't accept, they will be off my property before the week is over. Think about it," he said before apparating away, leaving her standing there, bewildered and dumbfounded, trying to convince herself that her encounter with Malfoy really had happened.

The tears fell then. Two twin streaks down her smooth cheeks. Anyone looking at her from the outside would just assume that she was a naturally emotional bride. No one could even begin suspect the truth. Not even Malfoy's own mother, who was at the moment smiling pleasantly.

Hermione zoned in right when the official was speaking to her. Weddings in wizarding society were different from those of the muggle world. There weren't any vows exchanged, unless the couple decided they wanted to include them. In this ceremony they obviously wouldn't. All that would be done was a union under the Ministry and the signing of a sort of family contract.

"Do you, Hermione Jane Granger, take this wizard, Draco Black Malfoy to be your provider, your companion, and your husband? To respect and be faithful until your dying day?"

The room felt large and silent, and she swore she heard a knut drop right at the very back. Why was everyone so damned quiet? Hermione stared into Malfoy's cold grey eyes as her own leaked more tears. She hadn't even been aware that they were facing each other and that Malfoy was holding her hands. He squeezed them for emphasis before murmuring her name. Hermione closed her eyes and nodded.

"I do. I accept," she said loud and clear, voice cracking at the end.

"Then by the power provided to me by the Ministry of Magic, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss your bride!" The man said jovially.

Hermione gave him a sick look as he leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to her clamped shut lips. They then proceeded to sign their contract of marriage that had stipulations regarding their living arrangements, the duties of a Malfoy bride, and the fortune that would pass to her hands. When she put down her signature with a pure-white quill, there was no ink used, it signed with her magic.

The guests applauded for a long moment before they left their seats to congratulate the new Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. Hermione held her tears at bay as her mother hugged her and cried. Her mother was the only person here for her. Her friends had deserted her, Harry was taking Ron's side, and her father had died only two years ago.

Bless her mother, she was the only one who had stayed with her and hadn't questioned the fact

that she had broken up with one man and had turned around to marry another. Hermione still couldn't help but feel alone, even as her mother whispered sweet best wishes for her and her husband. She looked happy to see Hermione married to a "good" young man who looked like he was deeply in love with her. Little did she know, Hermione thought. Merlin, how was she going to survive this?

The reception was just as extravagant as the ceremony. The guests were seated at round tables that were covered in silk cloths, China plates and actual silverware. The flower centerpieces were composed of white roses, Asian lilies, and African Amaryllis in the center. Above them, white candles floated now that the sun had gone down, lighting the majestic garden where the reception was being held with a warm glow.

Hermione hadn't tried her salad, or the main dish. Not even the bubbly champagne had any appeal. None of the guests had figured out that the small smile on her face was a fake, nor did they see that the tears in her eyes were of sorrow. Malfoy knew. Sadistic bastard that he was. He was most likely enjoying them. She would hate the man seated next to her until the day she died.

She had been foolish to accept his proposal blindly, but she had been desperate to help Molly and Arthur keep their home; she had just accepted it without putting down some ground rules first. But as soon as they were in private, he would get a piece of her mind.

"Come along, darling," Draco said as he took her hand and pulled her to her feet.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked in alarm. She had spent the better part of the evening brooding, so she was a bit out of the loop.

He gave her a calculating look. "We are getting our picture taken by a professional photographer and by a reporter's photographer. After all, our pictures will be front page on every newspaper and magazine tomorrow. Now, may I suggest that you get that mournful look off of your face? Remember, you're a happily married woman now. It was part of our deal," he said lightly.

Hermione cursed the fact that she had left her wand at the table. He had taken her by surprise and she hadn't even remembered to bring it with her. She forced a more cheerful look onto her face as they approached the photographer. He made them stand under a group of candles, with many magnificent flowers as a background, Malfoy's hands on her waist and her own on his chest.

Hermione had to remind herself why she was doing this. She had to fight down the repulsion she felt when his chin touched her temple, or the way his fingers barely moved against her hips. She was doing this for Arthur and Molly. Because Arthur had been ready to give his life for the lives of her parents. During the war he had almost died while protecting them, and Hermione had vowed that one day she would repay what he had done for her, for her parents.

Well, the day had come. But as the flash went off, Hermione silently mused that she never would've guessed that the debt would've been repaid at the cost of her freedom. Of her heart.

Malfoy Manor truly was a beautiful place. On the outside it reminded Hermione of Dracula's castle as described in books, though it stretched out horizontally and not vertically. Inside it was full of dark yet attractive décor. The party was over and Hermione was exhausted. Her face actually hurt after the forced smile she had worn on her face for the last four hours.

As soon as she and Malfoy had joint apparated from the reception to the Manor, Hermione had nearly tore off the crown of roses on her head. "If you would show me to my room, I need to get this dress off," she said in a clipped tone.

"Father has given us the entire East Wing. Our bedroom will be up the stairs and to the right," he said.

Hermione gave him a dark look. "What do you mean our bedroom?" she asked in a tone that was very near hostile.

"We're married and you have certain obligations with your husband," he told her haughtily.

She let out a derisive laugh. "Listen you slimy git, I may have agreed to this charade but you and I will never be a real couple. Understand? I would never let a filthy little roach like you lay a hand on me. If you don't like it, you can shove it. We are going to sleep in separate bedrooms, and if possible on separate ends of the Manor unless you want to wake up with an irreversible hair shedding hex upon your head," she informed him.

"You wouldn't dare," he hissed.

"Would you care to find out?" Hermione challenged.

Draco wasn't really afraid of her, but deep down he knew she would do it. There was a gleam in her eyes that told him that she wasn't bluffing.

"Children, are we fighting already?" Asked Lucius as he and Narcissa moved into the entry way, arm in arm.

"You're married now, do try to get along," Narcissa said, noticing that the crown of roses that had been resting on Hermione's head was now sitting on the center table, a few petals had fallen off.

Hermione pulled at the neat curls in her hair but they didn't budge until she used her wand to end the charm that had kept them in place. The curls fell in place down her pale shoulders and back, making Hermione feel remotely better. The "happy bride" façade was over and done with and she didn't care who saw.

"With all due respect, Mrs. Malfoy, marrying your son was the last thing I wanted to do in this or any lifetime," Hermione said with a scowl.

Draco's eyes narrowed and he grabbed her arm tightly. "Let's go to your room," he said through his teeth.

"No," Lucius said sternly. "What does she mean by that?" he asked Draco.

"Nothing father, she is just angry over a spat we had," Draco said, squeezing her arm harder.

Narcissa saw Hermione wince and a dark look came over her still smooth and beautiful face. "Draco dear, your father and I didn't raise you to manhandle a woman. Release her," she ordered icily.

Hermione rubbed her hurting arm when he did, making a big show of being in pain when she really wasn't. Malfoy looked angry, but she didn't care. She wanted to hurt him the way he had hurt her and it was glaringly obvious that his parents knew nothing about his blackmail stipulations.

Hermione smiled saccharinely. "I was just letting Draco know that we were going to sleep in separate bedrooms. I want him nowhere near me," she said matter-of-factly.

"Come now, Hermione. There is no need to be afraid of your wedding night," said Lucius in amusement.

Hermione and Draco both went red at the mention of a wedding night. It was disturbing, especially when it was coming from his father. "That's not it," she started.

"You'll shut your mouth if you know what's good for you," Draco snarled.

She gave him a cool look. "What? You don't want your parents to know that you blackmailed me into marrying you? That you made me break the heart of the man that I really love?" she spat, her eyes watering at the mention of Ron.

"Draco!" Narcissa exclaimed while Lucius was silent. He wasn't so surprised and he wasn't angry at the boy either, though he knew that Narcissa would be. She had always been too soft for a Slytherin. But he and Draco would be true Slytherins to the end. It really didn't matter how they accomplished things as long as they got their way, and Lucius had been very aware that Draco had been mooning over the girl since their fourth year of school. He hadn't made a comment or scorned his son for it because Draco had hated her with such raw passion Lucius figured that he would get over it.

"Tilly," Narcissa said.

Almost instantly a little elf appeared before them, looking frightened when her eyes fell on Lucius and Draco. "Y-yes Mistress?" she squeaked.

"Take my daughter-in-law to her room and prepare a separate room for my son on the opposite end of hers in the East Wing as well," Narcissa ordered.

"Yes Mistress, if Miss Hermione will please follow Tilly," said the elf as she showed Hermione up the stairs.

"Goodnight," Hermione said politely before she disappeared from sight. She fervently hoped that Narcissa gave Malfoy and earful.

Draco stared at his parents as they sat in the study. His mother hadn't said anything yet and he was feeling a bit nervous at the silent treatment he was receiving. As a child, his punishments had always been worse when they came from his mother because she had used words instead

of actions to berate him, and she had a habit of getting under his skin.

"Merlin, Draco. Are you dense or are you just plain crazy?"

That was it? Hmmm, mum was losing her touch. He shrugged. "Come now mother, don't go soft on me. We have always done what needs to get done when we want something."

"Well said," Lucius complimented.

Narcissa gave him a look. "Do not encourage him, Lucius. We tried doing what was necessary to get what we wanted and look where it got us! Your father in prison for two years and our family name dragged through the mud," she said darkly.

Lucius tilted his head to the side. "We have been given a second chance to make a great name and reputation for our family once again. Marrying this girl was a wise move, but if the media gets wind of how you did it, we will bring down what little we have accomplished."

Draco nodded. "She's here now, mother. She knows that if she opens her mouth about this, I will break our deal," he said aloofly.

"And what was that deal?" his mother asked.

"The less you know, the better. Plausible deniability and all that," Draco replied.

Narcissa just shook her head. "This isn't the way to win her over, Draco. If you keep this path, she will hate you more and more each day until it becomes too late," she said as she stood. She turned to Lucius. "Don't be too long, Lucius," she said before walking out of the study.

Lucius gave his son a thoughtful look. "If your interest in her ran so deep, why not just approach her?"

Draco shook his head. "You heard her. She was happy with Weasley. She never would've left him for me," he said icily.

His father smirked. "Now that she's in your hands, you know what to do, don't you? You must woo her, seduce her, make her fall for you so deeply that she will forget about leaving you for the pauper. We're Malfoy's and we possess natural irresistible charm. She hates you now, but I am sure that you can change her mind," Lucius said.

Draco gave him a strange look. "Why are you so interested in me seducing my dear wife?"

"Did you forget that there is a clause in your pre-nup?" The look on Draco's face told Lucius that the boy remembered nothing. "She has to have a child before your second year of marriage or at least conceive before your second anniversary. Otherwise the marriage is dissolved and she gets to keep half of your inheritance."

"I seem to have overlooked that little detail," said Draco with a small scowl on his face.

"That will teach you to read the fine print before signing anything," said Lucius in amusement.

"How am I going to get her pregnant when she can't even stand the sight of me?" Draco asked

with a groan.

Lucius felt like slapping him in the back of the head. "Well, find a way! Treat her right, win her over little by little. Get her drunk and seduce her. Draco, do anything short of rape. She would not keep that silent regardless of how you are blackmailing her," he said.

"I wouldn't stoop that low."

His father nodded. "You can manipulate the situation in order that she cannot blame you for impregnating her," said Lucius slyly.

Draco chuckled. His father was the perfect Slytherin. "I should get to bed, I have a lot of scheming to do tomorrow," he muttered, standing and walking to the door.

"Remember Draco, time is ticking and you have very little time to convince her not to hate you anymore."

Draco nodded and walked away without another word. He wasn't a bad person. He knew what Granger was most likely feeling at the moment. She was angry enough to hurt him, but he didn't care. He had accomplished what he had dreamed of doing for years.

He had married the woman of his dreams and showed up Weasley once again. He had stopped denying that he wanted her a long time ago. Finding out that the Weasley's were going to lose their home had been the best news he had ever gotten.

Being a Malfoy had taught him many things, one of which was to take advantage of any situation. While staring at an image of her he had picked up after it had fallen out of Weasley's hole filled book-bag, an idea had quickly formed in his mind. Maybe his idea hadn't been the most original or the smartest, but that didn't matter now. She was married to him and he had two years to make her love him or at least allow him the chance to shag her once. One time. That was all he needed to get what he wanted. To get her to stay with him for the rest of their lives.

Though she was loath to admit it, Hermione had to admit that she had slept well in her new, firm bed. She'd been up until one in the morning, but then she had gone into a dreamless sleep and was now wide awake and a little hungry. Then she remembered with whom she would be sharing the table with and her hunger went away, making her stomach ache.

She stood and made her way to her own personal bathroom. She needed a hot shower before facing the world as the new Mrs. Malfoy. When she walked out, a full thirty minutes later, she walked over to the place where she was sure she had left her wand. But it wasn't there.

"Looking for something?" A deep voice asked from behind her, placing the tip of something hard and cold against her temple.

Hermione grit her teeth but didn't move. "What did you do to my wand?" she snapped.

"It's inside my pocket. Where you can't possibly get it," replied Draco in amusement.

"What do you want?" she asked wearily, pulling her terry cloth robe tighter around her. How had he gotten into her room when she had locked and charmed it?

"That little stunt with my parents didn't work, but you did manage to make me angry," he whispered as he wrapped an arm around her waist and moved his lips to her other temple.

"Am I supposed to feel threatened? Afraid? Distressed?" she asked mockingly. "Malfoy, please. You scare me as much as my bunny slippers scare me. Now unhand me and give me back my wand," Hermione growled.

"I don't think I want to do that. I am a very skilled at Obliviation my dear Hermione. I can make you forget all that love you feel for your dear red-Weasel. Wouldn't that be so much better than just sitting here, pinning over him?" asked Draco with a chuckle.

"Don't you dare mess with my memories, you piece of crap, or I will make you wish you were never born," she snarled before she elbowed him in the ribs, turned and pushed his head down to meet her raised knee.

Draco grunted with the impact before falling flat on his arse. When he looked up, Hermione had her wand in her hand. How the hell had she—? Never mind that. She had a look on her face fit to scare the devil.

"Get out of my room," she snarled. "You will never again come in here unless I give you permission. Do you hear me? And it will be a cold day in hell when I invite you to come into my room," she spat.

"We'll see about that, Hermione. I am a very persuasive man and I always get what I want. Our marriage is just one example," he said quietly.

Draco slowly stood, careful to not make any sudden movements. There was a distinct pop of an elf appearing in the hall that drew her attention and allowed him to strike. He moved forward and pressed a kiss to her lips, slipping his tongue into her open mouth. Almost instantly she began to struggle and push at him, but he didn't give her the chance to harm him physically again. He released her so fast that she fell on her own bum and then he was gone.

Hermione cursed darkly before shutting the door to her room and placing every imaginable charm against his intrusion. Then she began to get dressed for a day out with Narcissa. Great Merlin, how was her day going to be with such an aristocratic and cold looking woman?

Well, was that a good enough start? I really do hope so. I can't wait to see what you guys thought about this. I know I'm not very constant when it comes to updating, but I'm really going to try my best. Thank you for taking the time to read my work.

!Joey!

P.S.

For my returning readers, "Make Me Forget His Name," has been nominated for the Delicious Ideas(Most Creative) category in **Round 5 of He Had It Coming** So if you have a spare moment and would like for my fic to win, go and vote and I will always be grateful to those who

did. The link is in my bio, so just click and go take a look at the other great fics out there!

Byebye

Chapter 2: Love and Hate

I chased away the shadows of your name

And burned the picture in a frame

But it couldn't save me

"I wonder what is taking Draco so long," Narcissa commented as she, Lucius and Hermione sat at the large breakfast table, being served a very exaggerated first meal of the day.

"Maybe he lost track of time as he stared at himself in the mirror," Hermione commented snidely.

Narcissa looked like she had stifled a smirk while Lucius ignored her. Then, speak of the devil himself, and he walked into the room, his nose and forehead slightly pink. His mother looked him over.

Hermione gave him a darkly amused look. "Good morning, dear, you're looking mighty pink this morning," Hermione said sweetly, taking a piece of waffle to her mouth.

He just gave her a forced smile and his eyes glittered with a promise of retribution. "Mother, will you make sure that my lovely wife has a proper cocktail dress for our dinner party this evening? I doubt she will be able to find something that meets Malfoy standards on her own," he said offhandedly.

Hermione silently fumed and contemplated if it would be immature on her part to hurl her orange juice in his face.

"Something tasteful and elegant," Lucius agreed. "And buy her some jewelry."

Narcissa nodded and took a delicate sip of her herbal tea. "Yes, dear," she said patiently, and Hermione could tell that she was trying very hard to not roll her eyes. After all, that was hardly proper etiquette for their society.

"You should eat more," Lucius told Hermione. "You're too thin."

"This is how I normally look," Hermione said coldly. Her eyes settled on Draco. "Though I seem to have lost my appetite all of a sudden," she grumbled. Their meal dragged on for what seemed like three hours but had only been thirty minutes.

"We should get going then Hermione," Narcissa said as she stood and Lucius pressed a kiss to her hand. "We have a long day ahead of us."

Hermione nodded and stood, completely ignoring the men at the table. She didn't even bid them

goodbye as she followed Narcissa to the floo room. The elder woman noticed but decided that it was not the time to chide her. She wasn't in the mood for arguing and whining. She'd had enough of that from Draco since he had been a little boy.

"She's a rude little thing, isn't she?" Lucius asked Draco as the younger man took his coffee black.

Draco just shrugged.

Lucius looked at his son's face from over his newspaper and smirked inwardly. He wouldn't put it past the girl if she had slugged his son for some reason or another. He was curious to know. "Now, are you going to tell me why your face is so pink?"

"I'm not used to wearing clothes that are so expensive," Hermione grumbled as she modeled different outfits in front of her mother-in-law.

Narcissa looked at each dress and ensemble with a very critical eye. They had gone to the most expensive side of Diagon Alley where the shops were of the highest brand and quality. She shouldn't have been so shocked. Nothing less was worthy of a Malfoy, and she had to keep reminding herself that that was her last name now. Their life styles were ostentatious.

"That particular color complements your skin color and the cut enhances your curves," said Narcissa in approval as Hermione showed her the third choice for the party Malfoy had referred to.

The dress was an aqua color that fell over her shoulders in two thin straps and a skirt that puffed up and around her stylishly. The back of it was tied like a corset and it cinched her slim waist nicely. It reminded Hermione of the dresses worn in the fifties. As for accessories, she would be wearing a long, matching, see-through scarf across her throat and down her back, glittery stilettos that cost more than all of the shoes she had ever owned combined and more than likely some sort of jewelry.

Narcissa had made her give her personal input on every outfit and had also asked her to choose what to take home. She had taken a few plain shirts and dress pants, but to her chagrin, the shop didn't sell jeans. And why would such a recognized shop sell articles of clothing considered as 'bad muggle taste'?

"Did you want to take anything else?" Narcissa asked her.

Hermione shook her head and sighed heavily. "You shouldn't spend so much on me. I'll wear the dresses to the parties because I don't own anything close to them, but I will keep wearing my faded jeans and simple tops because that is who I am, no matter that a married your son," Hermione said.

Narcissa respected her opinion. She hadn't been the same as Lucius and Draco. Sure, she had never consorted with muggles or muggle-borns, but she had never really hated them. This young woman before her was smart and valuable. She had graduated as one of the top of her class and as Head Girl. Something that was always a plus when looking for the woman your son would marry.

Her son had picked the perfect girl to fall in love with, but he had gone about the wrong way of courting her. "I do not argue that with you, but whenever you are in a public place, with the media following your every step, you must look presentable. You're no longer just Hermione Granger, the war hero. You are Hermione Malfoy, the war hero, now," Narcissa said very clearly.

Hermione felt angry tears well up in her eyes at the mention of her marriage, but she forced them back. She didn't want to make a scene, especially when the owner of the shop was watching their every move as if they were part of a muggle soap. "Are we finished here?" she asked softly.

Narcissa nodded. "Get changed out of that dress and we'll leave. We still have more places to visit."

Hermione just nodded and walked over to the changing room. When she was out of the expensive, stunning dress, she found that her jeans and her simple gray and pink sweater were gone, leaving behind a pair of brown slacks, a beige cashmere turtle-neck with a brown leather coat and a pair of brown high-heeled boots.

Now, unless she was willing to storm out of the changing room in her knickers, she had to put on the clothes. She found the whole ensemble fit her perfectly, even the boots. When she walked out, her sneaky mother-in-law had already paid and ordered the packages to be delivered home.

The brunette hurried towards her but her words died in her throat at the chilling look Narcissa Malfoy gave her. The once Gryffindor Princess swallowed slightly before asking, "Where are my clothes?"

The blonde smiled in amusement, the coldness melting away in seconds. "I had them delivered back to your room. I just knew that this ensemble would suit you well," she said with a nod.

Hermione choked back an irritated sigh. At least she hadn't thrown away her things, and she had to admit that these pants fit her bum rather nicely. But still, she didn't like when people made decisions for her without consulting her.

"Now we have an appointment with my personal hair stylist. She told me that she had the perfect solution for your rather unruly hair," she said as they walked out of the shop.

"I have tried many things on my hair but nothing works, at least not for very long," Hermione said as they walked a short distance to another fancy establishment.

Narcissa merely sniffed. "This happens to be the best stylist in the country. Of course she will have a solution for your stubborn hair."

Hermione stayed quiet for a few minutes as they walked closer, but she couldn't stop the question that was nagging her in the back of her mind. "You agree with the way Draco got me to marry him?"

The taller woman shook her head. "I don't, but his father supports him in everything that brings our family a better reputation. Marrying you may have been the worst thing in the world for you, but it was a strategic move to the eyes of society. You are a war hero and you are the purest of

souls in this charade of power and pureblood. Don't judge Draco too hard, regardless of what he did to you to get you to marry him."

"If you only knew," Hermione said bitterly.

"Then tell me," Narcissa told her gently.

Hermione shook her head. "I can't. I can't tell anyone."

"I have seen my son pay for the stupidity of his younger years. He's not a bad man and he has the scars to prove that he paid for what he did. He's just a man, a foolish man yes, just like his father. But he's not evil. They just go about doing things a man's way," Narcissa murmured as two women stepped out of the beauty salon.

Hermione shook her head. "There's no love between us. He just found the opportunity to destroy Ron and make me miserable and he took it."

Narcissa gave her a mysterious look. "My son doesn't show his emotions, but he feels something special for you. From the moment he met you. He would rant and rave about you besting him in one way or another. Then he came home sporting a black eye during your third year, and when I asked about him, he said that he had had a run-in with the little know-it-all. I see it in him and it is like a mixture of love and hate that he doesn't know how to handle."

The ex-Gryffindor decided to keep her mouth shut. She had to remind herself that she was a woman and bouts of childishness would make her look ridiculous. Malfoy in love with her? Yeah, right. That bastard didn't know the meaning of love.

She followed Narcissa into the beauty salon and frowned when all the noise died down as if a switch had been thrown. Hermione recognized the matriarch's of the pureblooded families who hadn't participated with Voldemort and of course they knew who she was. They all stared at her with slight disdain but Hermione squared her shoulders and stared them all down. She wasn't intimidated by a group of superficial old women.

"Narcissa, darling!" A woman in dark robes said as she swept into the waiting room of the salon, cutting through the tense atmosphere. "As punctual as always."

The blonde woman smiled pleasantly. "I am always on time, Diana," she said before turning to Hermione. "And you've already met my daughter-in-law." She had been the one to fix her hair up for the ceremony.

Diana nodded and gave Hermione a polite smile. "Shouldn't you be at your honeymoon, dear?"

Hermione gave her that saccharine smile she was growing so fond of as of late and shook her head. "We are postponing our trip due to business," she replied, aware that all the women present were listening avidly. Mostly because they all had daughters Hermione's age who had aspired to become the next Mrs. Malfoy.

They would probably get their wish pretty soon; Hermione wasn't sure how long she would be able to live at Malfoy's side. "Come along then, let's get to work on that hair," Diana said as she led the way to a private room.

Hermione sighed to herself. She hated being Narcissa's guinea pig, but for the Weasley's peace of mind, she would take it all.

Hermione stared at her reflection in the mirror with wide eyes. Her wild tangled hair had been subdued into silky curls that Narcissa Malfoy was sifting her fingers through effortlessly. "It looks wonderful," the blonde told the stylist.

Diana nodded. "The gel is my very own invention. You should wash your hair every morning and then place the gel in while it is still damp. The charm dries your hair instantly and leaves behind the silky curls."

Hermione nodded and ran her own fingers through her soft hair. "Thank you!"

"Very good. My daughter-in-law is going to require the use of your gel every day. Will you be able to send her a month's worth of the gel of the beginning of the month?"

"Of course and it would be my pleasure," Diana said.

"Good. Just send us the bill with every monthly delivery," Narcissa said in approval.

Diana gave a curt nod. "Of course. It has been my delight to make you two women even more beautiful for your handsome husbands," she said with a smile.

Hermione nearly scowled in annoyance but stopped herself. She thanked the woman once again before she and Narcissa left the beauty parlor and moved towards the jewelry store. She was already shaking her head as they made it to the doors of the exclusive jewelry place.

"I've had enough, Mrs. Malfoy. The make-over I can deal with, but buying me extremely expensive things is something I don't want and I don't need," she said stubbornly.

Narcissa gave her a look that said many things. "You are a Malfoy. Must I remind you at every hour? And as such you are entitled to expensive things whether you want them or not. But go ahead and stay out here if you'd like. I doubt you have any jewelry knowledge. I'll pick out what's necessary," she said impatiently before walking into the jewelry shop.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest petulantly. She loathed being treated like a child. She loathed being treated like one of those pampered, brain-dead girls who were born into privilege and money. As she looked down the street she nearly fell on her face when she took a wrong step.

Coming down the street was Ron. But he wasn't alone. Lavender Brown was clinging to his arm and behind them were Ginny and Harry. Accepting that she was an enormous coward, she nearly ran into the jewelry shop where the owner himself was currently showing Narcissa very expensive silver and diamond chokers.

"Change your mind?" Narcissa asked without turning to look at her.

"Sure," Hermione said with a shrug.

"Take a look around, then. If you see something you like just tell the pleasant man here and he

will have it delivered to the Manor."

Hermione just nodded and looked around at the most beautiful pieces she had ever laid her eyes on. She stared at a case holding a very beautiful silver chain with a ruby and diamond teardrop. She had never been one to wear jewelry, but the necklace was a real sight. She looked towards the door and hoped that Ron was gone. She didn't have the courage to face him, to look him in the eyes after she had broken his heart and left him to marry his worst enemy.

She could admit that she still loved him more than anything and seeing him with another woman felt like a blade had been driven through her heart once again. But she also thought about how he had probably felt when she had broken up with him and told him that she was going to marry Malfoy. This whole marriage deal was putting a great strain on her nerves and she knew that she would snap at any minute or as soon as she and Malfoy crossed words again.

"Is there anything you would like to take?" Narcissa asked her.

Hermione shook her head but said nothing. She just wanted to get back to her room at the Manor so that she could shut herself in and be alone for the rest of the day. She wanted to cry in peace.

"Fine, we can go now," Narcissa said after she had paid the man for the things that would be delivered to the Manor. "Are you hungry at all?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. If it's alright with you can we go back home?"

Narcissa looked at her and nodded. There was something odd about Hermione. She looked on the verge of breaking down when a few minutes ago she had even started to participate in her makeover. Narcissa agreed with her, maybe it was best if they went home. "I think we are done for the day. We can have lunch at the Manor and you can have enough time to get ready for the party. Lucius and I will not be going because we have a prior engagement."

As they stepped out, Hermione nearly fainted when they walked right into the people she hadn't wanted to see. Her eyes moved to Ron's first, but he wouldn't even look at her. And Ginny as always was quick to say something insulting and hurtful.

"Look at who we have here. Mrs. Malfoy and Mrs. Malfoy. My, my, Hermione you certainly have settled into your new life quite comfortably. I just never knew you were so shallow to marry for money," Ginny said.

Hermione pursed her lips in anger. "You never knew me at all, then." She turned to Ron and saw Lavender hold onto him even tighter. "Ron. Ron please look at—"

"Don't even talk to him, you gold-digging whore!" Lavender spat angrily.

"You will close your mouth if you know what is good for you," Narcissa hissed quietly. "I will not allow you to insult my daughter-in-law. She is a better person than any of you have ever dreamed of being, so do not dare to speak to her that way."

Hermione blinked in amazement but her eyes were still on Ron, who finally turned to look at her. He looked at her from head to toe and a sad and disgusted look crossed his handsome

features. "They're right, Hermione. Why else would you marry Malfoy?" he asked her hoarsely.

Harry and the women stared at her and waited for an answer. Hermione swallowed hard and looked away from them, but not before her eyes met Harry's green ones. She just lowered her gaze from his sad eyes and turned to go.

"Do you love him, Hermione?" Harry asked. "Malfoy, I mean. Do you love Malfoy?"

She froze in her tracks with her back to them. What did they want to hear? Why? It would only harm her and Ron even more. Her mouth opened but her voice wouldn't work. She felt as if she had swallowed broken glass as a single word left her lips.

"Yes."

Narcissa Malfoy sent them all a last glare before she ushered Hermione to an apparition point. She sensed that the girl needed to get to safety before her fragile control shattered into a million pieces.

The clock struck four o'clock in the afternoon and still Hermione lay on her bed, hot tears burning a path down her already red cheeks. She stared at the only picture she had kept of herself and Ron. It was a magical picture of her jumping onto his back and placing many kisses on his cheek as he twirled them both. The weather was bright and sunny as they stood in the backyard of the burrow. He then set her down and kissed her in earnest.

A sob escaped from her lips as she pressed the picture to her chest. There was a knock at her door and she quickly stuffed the picture under her pillow before standing and walking over to open the door.

Hermione let out a deep sigh. "What do you want?" she asked in annoyance. She didn't have the strength to deal with him right now.

"Have you been crying?" Draco asked pointedly.

"Of course not, I'm just putting moisture into my eyes," was her snappy reply. "What do you want?" she asked again.

"May I come in?" he asked from the doorway.

Hermione shrugged her shoulders. "As long as you don't get any stupid ideas, go ahead."

Draco stepped in and shut the door. "My mother told me that you bumped into the Weasel and his sister. They think you married me for my money."

She nodded stiffly, sitting on her bed. "Why else would I marry someone like you?"

Draco cocked his head to the side and regarded her for a long moment. "Then they don't know you at all. They were supposed to be your best friends and they can't even realize that you married me for something other than money?"

Hermione gritted her teeth in anger. "Why are you here, Draco. Do you want to gloat? Don't

bother. I feel like shite enough already. I don't understand why you care anyways. You should be happy because they don't suspect a thing," she said bitterly.

Draco walked over to crouch in front of her. "Would you believe me if I told you that I didn't marry you to spite the Weasel or to make you miserable? That there is more to this than just wanting you and having you so that he can't have you?"

She shook her head. "Of course I wouldn't. Come on, Malfoy. You don't feel anything for me! Otherwise you wouldn't have ruined my life the way you did!"

"Don't be so sure," he said in annoyance. "You were always unattainable to me, and that made me want you all the more. Your attention was always on Weasley and I wasn't supposed to feel that way for the enemy," he murmured.

Hermione stared hard at him. "Don't do that!" she yelled as she stood and nearly pushed him to the floor with her legs.

"Do what?" he asked angrily, standing.

"Don't manipulate me into thinking that you love me, or that you felt something for me when we were in school because I won't believe you. You treated me like dirt! You hurt my friends and belittled me every time we crossed paths. I love Ron and I always will! I will never feel anything for you but repulsion and anger. You ruined my life and made the man that I love hate me and just for that I will never forgive you!" Hermione hissed.

Draco merely stared at her. "Would you like to make a wager?"

"What?"

"A bet."

Despite her anger she was curious as to where he was getting at. "What kind of a bet?"

Draco smirked. He had her undivided attention. "I will only hold you at my side for two years."

Hermione stared at him. "You'll let me go in two years?" she asked, her eyes brightening.

"That's not how it works. I will give you a divorce in two years if I have not managed to change your way of thinking. If I have not gotten you to fall in love with me."

"Good luck, pal."

His eyes glittered. "Hmm, thank you, but I am not planning on losing."

"Neither am I," Hermione said as she crossed her arms over her chest. "So if I'm not in love with you by our second anniversary, I go free?"

"Yes."

"What's the catch?"

"No catch, I just have to get you to love me. That means that you have to give me a chance. Go on dates with me, try not to be so hostile," he explained with an evil smile on his handsome face.

She scoffed. "No deal. In case you didn't realize it, that happens to be a catch. There is no way that I am going to date you and give you the chance to make up stories to charm me. You and I will never be serious. Not because I'm being unfair, but because you didn't care about me when you blackmailed me into marrying you. You don't deserve me," Hermione told him seriously.

Draco just smirked. "If you don't satisfy your husbands needs the way you are supposed to, then I have to get my kicks some other way. You are very aware of the fact that neither of us can be unfaithful, so let me remind you that you are now my wife. If I want to date you, I will because I have the power. I have the Weasley's in my hands and that is why you will agree. Just be thankful that I haven't blackmailed you into my bed," he sneered, running his fingers through her hair. "You look stunning, by the way."

Hermione bit her lip in order to keep from cursing her dear husband through the wall. "You are the biggest arsehole in this universe and I hate you with all my heart," she said in a deathly soft tone.

Draco sighed. "Just remember that you will love me before our two year anniversary comes around," he said, his nose taking in the sweet scent of her hair.

"We'll see about that," she said acidly. "I will always love Ron and I will always hate you."

Draco turned her chin so that their eyes could meet. "The question is, my dear, will he always love you?" Brown eyes on grey, both equally filled with intense, turbulent emotions. "Know that for me this isn't a game. I have wanted to be with you for a very long time." He paused and let his words sink in as they stared at each other. "Be ready at seven. I'll wait for you in the foyer," he said before leaving the room.

Hermione stood there for a long moment, wondering what had just happened. She refused to believe that Malfoy was in love with her or that he felt anything for her like Narcissa had said. It was just too surreal. But his eyes..... No. No. Had he loved her, even a little, he wouldn't have been doing all of this to her. Then again, this was the man who had tormented her for years and who now claimed to "feel" something for her.

He sure had a bizarre way of caring for her. Hermione scowled to herself and tried to rid her mind of the image of his pale grey eyes, so open and..... Honest was the wrong word. Clear? Maybe.

She scoffed. Stupid Malfoy.

Hermione had discovered that the party she and Malfoy were going to was a fundraiser for scholarships to help those children who had lost their parents in the war. They would have a fully paid seven years of education at Hogwarts so that they could fend for themselves once they left the school. She never would've thought that Malfoy would participate in something like this. Especially when the fundraising organization was charging an absurd amount for each plate. But in the end the cost didn't matter because they would be helping out the children who needed it.

She let out a slow breath as she made her way to the foyer just a few minutes before seven. The heels she had on were dangerously tall, but she loved the style of the sparkling straps as they adorned her feet stylishly. Her still manageable hair was in neat waves and held up on one side by a silver dragon pin and she wore the aqua dress her mother-in-law had told her flattered her shape.

Hermione was also wearing a diamond and silver choker that she had to admit was a beauty, although she felt a bit suffocated. She shifted her hand bag and stepped into the foyer where her idiotic husband was already waiting. She cleared her throat and he turned around, his eyes going wide as he looked at her.

"You look..... suitable," he said flatly.

"You sure know how to make a girl feel special. I'm falling in love with you already," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

"You're right," Draco said with a frown. "Forgive me, my dear. I was a complete brute. You are looking mighty beautiful tonight. I'll be the envy of all the men at this party," he said with a smirk.

Hermione grit her teeth and forced herself to not look him up and down. Though she hated him and everything he was, she had to admit that he looked handsome in his expensive clothes and robes. He had also just trimmed his hair today to above his ears.

"Let's go," he said, grabbing her arm so that they could joint apparate. When they arrived at the hall, he tried to take her hand, but she moved out of his touch. He snatched her hand back and squeezed as they walked into the main room.

"Stop it!" she hissed. "You're hurting me."

Draco stopped squeezing but didn't let her go as the crowd parted and let them through. He raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them in apology. Hermione just watched him with barely restrained fury and relaxed. Then she was very aware that all eyes were on them. Familiar eyes.

Old friends from Hogwarts were there but many were old Slytherins. Some Hermione recognized and remembered having a school girl crush on. Such as Adrian Pucey and Blaise Zabini. Then she spotted Cormac McLaggen and tried to hide from him before he saw her.

"What are you doing?" Draco asked her as they shook hands with people and exchanged polite hellos.

"McLaggen is over there. Now that is one man that I do not want to deal with right now. I can hazard to say that he has more ego than you. And that is saying a lot," Hermione told him.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Well, why don't we just go over and say hello? I never liked the bloke anyway. Besides, I get to rub in his face that you are now mine," he said pleasantly.

Hermione glared at him but then stopped cold when she spotted the four people she hadn't thought she would see so soon. Ron, Harry, Ginny, and Lavender. "Merlin, why me?" she whimpered.

Draco's eyes had already fallen on her old—ex—friends and a slow smirk was sliding over his features as he slid his hand over Hermione's hips and leaned down to whisper something in her ear. "Remember that we made a deal. You will act as if you are blindly in love with me whenever we are in public. No matter who is watching you. Are we clear?"

She just nodded and placed her hand on his chest, pushing him away with a forced smile on her face. Zabini, Pucey, Flint, Crabbe, Goyle and other Slytherins approached them and began to congratulate Draco again for his marriage to her.

Blaise was actually the only one in the group who paid her any attention. "Hello, Hermione," he said as he took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles.

Hermione smiled slowly. She liked him already. "Hello, Blaise. It's nice to see you again."

"Likewise," he said, hiding a grin when Draco snatched her hand from his grip. "No need to be so violent, my friend. I'm just admiring your beautiful wife."

"Thank you," Draco said warningly. He didn't like the way Zabini was eyeing his little Gryffindor, and it pissed him off that she wasn't acting offended by it either. He was thankful for whichever Malfoy had come up with the anti-cheating clause in the pre-nup. Otherwise he had no doubt that his dear Granger would've been back in Weasley's arms, or worse, thinking of going for Zabini's advances.

"We should start finding our table," Hermione said to Draco as her eyes looked for Ron and Harry.

"Hmm, we should," Draco said as he excused them and walked her straight to the table where her friends had been sitting.

"What are you doing?" Hermione asked apprehensively.

"This is pre-arranged seating, Hermione. I didn't seat us at the same table with those people," he said.

"I can't sit with them," Hermione said almost frantically. "Please don't do this to me!"

"I told you already, I had nothing to do with this," he said as they reached the table and he pulled the chair out for her.

Harry and Ginny were just as shocked as her when she sat down and gave them a small smile. "Good evening," she said uncomfortably.

"It was until you sat here," Ginny snarked.

Hermione pursed her lips and prayed for patience. She understood what her friend was going through because she had hurt her brother, but there was only so much she was going to be able to take. Draco sat next to her and took her trembling hand in his, rubbing soothing circles in her palm. Harry watched them quietly and gave Hermione one of those sad looks of his that almost made her cry.

Then Ron and Lavender approached the table and stopped when they saw that she was there with Draco. Ron's eyes moved to her hand in Malfoy's lap as he continued to rub her fingers gently. He sat down right across from her and stared at his plate.

"Hmm, I guess no one but us has manners at this table," Draco said with a light sneer.

"Shut up, Malfoy. No one but yourself wants to hear the sound of your voice," Harry spat.

"Why don't we just completely ignore the unpleasantness at this table?" Ginny asked as she wrapped her arm around Harry's.

"You're one to talk, Weasley. The only unpleasantness at this table is your loud mouth that doesn't seem to know when to stay shut," Draco said with that same annoying drawl Hermione had come to loathe in their childhood.

"Don't talk to her that way," Harry spat, nearly rising from the table. If it hadn't been for Ginny's arm, he would've cursed Malfoy and caused a very big scandal.

"Draco," Hermione said quietly. "Please."

He looked into those soft brown eyes and felt his anger burn down. Though he knew that she was faking that look, he had to admit that it was very convincing. "Fine," he muttered.

Ron just shook his head in disgust and left the table without a word, Lavender running after him. Hermione felt her heart sink back into her stomach at the look of heartbreak she had seen on his face before he had left. 'I'm sorry, Ron. I love you so much, but your parents did so much for me and I can't leave them out in the cold,' she thought to herself.

They had a fairly pleasant meal even though Ron and Lavender did not return. Then Draco left her to go talk to his friends and surround himself by wenches who were wearing too little, but Hermione found she hardly cared as she stared at her glass of white wine.

"Hermione?" Harry asked as he came back to the empty table to find her there alone. "Why aren't you with your husband?"

"Please Harry, leave me alone. I can't take you insulting me and asking me questions right now," she whispered brokenly.

Her old friend frowned and stared at her. She didn't have the face of someone who was happy and madly in love with her new husband. She looked tired and heartbroken. He'd seen it earlier that day when they had seen her at Diagon Alley.

"Why did you marry him Hermione? If you loved him you wouldn't have that look on your face. You would look happy and in love," he whispered as he moved to a chair closer to her.

"Oh, Harry. There's so much that you just don't know," Hermione said sadly. "So much I can't tell you."

"What do you mean by that?" Harry asked with a frown. "Tell me Hermione. If something is going on, you need to tell me so that I can help you!" he said quickly.

"I can't," Hermione said as he watched Ginny storming over to where they were sitting. "Just forget that we were ever friends and take care of Ron. He doesn't deserve any of this."

"Let's go dance Harry," Ginny said as she took his hand and pulled him. But he didn't budge, instead he gave his girlfriend's hand a hard squeeze and stopped her. He was sick and tired of her ordering him around and acting like such a little brat. He loved her, but he was only willing to let her get away with so much.

"Hermione," Harry said, his voice full of concern.

"Did you not hear me, Harry?" Ginny asked angrily.

"Go with her, Harry. I don't want to cause problems," Hermione said before she stood and walked away.

Harry watched her go in consternation. Hermione wasn't usually this way. There was something going on and he had to find out what it was. As Ginny dragged him towards the dance floor, his eyes were on Hermione as she stopped to talk to Zabini and they walked out into the beautiful gardens of the vicinity the party was being held in.

She wasn't happy and though he knew that all the Weasley's hated her at the moment, he didn't. Hermione was his friend and he had to do everything possible to find out the reasons why she had married Malfoy.

How did everyone like this chap? Though it wasn't full of action, at least now we get to see that Harry suspects something and that Draco isn't so evil after all. Besides, all is fair in love and war, right? I hope everyone liked this chapter and I can't wait to hear what you all thought. Hopefully I'll be updating another story soon, I just don't know when exactly. Thanks to everyone for all the support and for taking the time to read my work!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 3: Indestructible

And how could we quit something we never even tried?

Well you still can't tell me why

Hermione moved away from the table where Harry was as fast as her heels could take her. She couldn't tell him anything because she had felt Malfoy's eyes on her the entire time Harry had been sitting next to her. So caught up in her thoughts was she that when Zabini stepped in her path, she nearly bowled him over, she was going that fast.

"Slow down, kid," he said with a slow grin.

Hermione took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry about that. It's just that I need some fresh air and I wasn't watching where I was going."

Blaise nodded. "Would you mind terribly if I accompanied you? We can walk in the gardens," he said.

Hermione nodded. "Sure. I would really like that," she said as they walked out the door and left behind all of the noise. She really felt the need to be in the company of someone who wasn't hating her or blackmailing her.

"So, how is life as the new Mrs. Malfoy?" Blaise asked her.

"Just peachy," Hermione said wryly. "I'm still getting used to my in-laws but it's been okay so far," she said.

Blaise smiled. "What are you planning on doing now that you are filthy rich?"

She gave him a dark, annoyed look. "I don't care for money. I never have and I never will. I want to keep working. I need the experience of working for the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures so that I can set up my very own trauma center to help them. I've been saving up for a few years now," she said with a wistful smile on her face.

"What a dream!" Blaise said. "Does Malfoy know about it?"

"No," she said curtly. "This is my dream and I am going to accomplish it on my own. I don't need Draco to help me at all."

"That's good. Men love an independent woman who doesn't wait for her man to help her accomplish her goals," Blaise said. "It's too bad Malfoy found you first, otherwise I would've given him a run for his money. It's amazing to find a woman with dreams other than bearing the children of a big-name, pureblood and spending their money on nonsense."

Hermione actually smiled. "I take it that there aren't many girls in your society that have real dreams like those?"

The dark man shook his head. "You, my dear, are one in a million. It really is too bad that you are already married."

"Stop hitting on me, Zabini. I'm married to your best friend," she said slyly. Even though the marriage was a fake, she wasn't the cheating type. Though she had to admit that Zabini was a very attractive man. Blasted pre-nup! She couldn't even cheat had she wanted to.

He gave her a flirtatious look. "I wouldn't call that flirting, per se. I'm just being polite with an old acquaintance," he replied as they admired all the beautiful and magical flowers. Each individual group of flowers gave off either light, an amazing scent, or what sounded suspiciously like music.

"I think we should go back. I don't want anyone to start talking and making up rumors about you and me," Hermione said as they walked back towards the hall. As they turned on the stone path, she almost tripped on a loose stone, but Blaise was there, his arms around her waist as

he caught her against him.

Hermione blinked at him with wide eyes as he held her pressed against him, saving her from a fall that would have probably injured her foot in those heels or at least would've scraped her knees. He had an unreadable expression on his face that confused her a bit, but he slowly released her, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Would you be interested in having lunch with me tomorrow?" he murmured.

She stared at him for a moment. What was he offering? She had to admit that she needed a friend right now, but she didn't know if befriending Blaise Zabini would be such a good idea. For many reasons. The main one was that he had been a Slytherin in his youth and she didn't know if she could trust him not to divulge whatever they talked about to Malfoy. Then there was another reason that raised Goosebumps on her skin. There was something between them, a sort of spark that made her nervous and she didn't know if it was wise to give that spark more wood. But she remembered that she had lost all of her friends when she had married Malfoy.

"I'd love to," she found herself saying before they stepped back into the dinner party. "Come by the Manor at around one o'clock. Is that okay with you?"

"Perfect," Blaise said before giving her knuckles another kiss and then walking off when he caught a flash of pale hair and expensive black robes.

"Where have you been?" Draco muttered as he approached his wife from behind.

Hermione gave him a cool look and smiled. "I needed some fresh air and your dear friend Blaise kept me company," she said sweetly.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her. "You would've cheated on me by now if there hadn't been a clause in the pre-nup," he said. It wasn't a question.

She gave him an angelic look, but Hermione suspected that a little bit of her devil side was showing itself as well. "I won't dignify that with a response, so I'll just leave you wondering if I would be capable of cheating on my husband when I hate the very ground he walks on," she said before some important people approached them.

Hermione was polite to the people and she stood by Malfoy as they spoke to some men who held high places in the society, but her eyes kept meeting Zabini's for some odd reason. He watched her with veiled interest and the heat in his gaze made Hermione edgy. Was Malfoy right? Would she have cheated on him if she had been able to? Maybe not. Mostly because she was still in love with Ron. But Ron hated her guts right at the moment and a girl had to get attention from somewhere, right? Right?

What had she gotten herself into?

Hermione hated the fact that she was spending her days doing nothing. She had been given a month off of work for the honeymoon, but she was desperate to get back to work, even though only two weeks had passed. Most of her time she spent painting since there wasn't anything else she could do, and bloody Malfoy had basically stopped her from leaving the Manor.

She'd had her lunch with Blaise, there at the estate and in the gardens. She had to admit that she enjoyed his company very much and had agreed to see him for lunch again today; he would be arriving shortly. She hadn't told her dastardly husband anything and she was thankful that her in-laws spent their time away from her. Draco for his part was spending his time managing the family fortune and finding ways to make himself richer. Hermione found that she hardly cared. The little sucker could rot in his money for all she cared.

"Mistress! Mistress!" a voice said excitedly.

She turned from her window and smiled at the little elf. "What is it, Beryl?" she asked.

"A Mr. Zabinini is here to see you!"

"Zabini, Beryl. Have him meet me in the first gazebo, the one by the lilies, please. We will have lunch there. I'll be down in a few minutes," Hermione said. The elf nodded and left the room with a loud pop.

Hermione smiled to herself and grabbed a coat. Though it wasn't too cold, the breeze was cool enough to make her feel chilled. Her hair was pulled back into a high pony-tail and she was wearing a pair of black slacks and a baby-blue cashmere sweater. As she walked down the steps, she wondered what Malfoy would say if he found out that she was spending time with his best friend.

Just as she turned to go down the hall leading towards the gardens, she heard the front door open and another elf nearly screaming with delight. "Mr. Harry Potter! It is a honor to be meeting you, sir!" said the little elf.

"Uh, thank you. I'm here to see Hermione," Harry said just as she approached.

Hermione wracked her mind for the name of the elf and finally grasped it. She had made it her mission to learn the names of all the elves working at the Manor and it had shocked her to learn how many there were. "Tilly, can you please go tell my guest that I will be along in a few minutes?" she asked.

"Yes, Mistress! Tilly is happy to be going!" the little creature said before running off at top speed.

Hermione gave Harry a tremulous smile. "It's good to see you again," she said gently. "How can I help you?"

Harry smiled back. "We need to talk. I can't get our last conversation out of my head. You gave me the feeling that something wasn't right between you and Malfoy, aside from the obvious fact that you two are completely incompatible. I need you to tell me what it is," Harry said seriously.

Hermione nearly smiled. Even though he wasn't supposed to be talking to her out of solidarity to Ron, Harry still cared and noticed things about her. But Malfoy's warnings echoed in her head with clear clarity. "Nothing is going on, Harry. I was just feeling a bit alone without you guys. How is Ron doing, by the way?" she asked softly.

Green eyes narrowed. "Don't change the subject, Hermione," he snapped. "Tell me, please. If he's blackmailing you, mistreating you, or hurting you in any way, you need to tell me," Harry said, concern shining from those beautiful eyes of his.

She nearly swallowed the words she was about to say. "I'm happy. I lo—love—" that word sounded foreign when speaking of Malfoy, "—I love Draco. He's my husband and there's nothing wrong between us."

Harry looked at her closely, an intense look of concentration on his face.

"Stop trying to invade my thoughts!" Hermione yelled.

"I saw something there, Hermione. What are you so afraid of that you won't tell me?" Harry asked as he stepped closer and gripped her arms gently.

Hermione's eyes watered. "I can't tell you," she nearly wailed.

"How did he force you into this marriage, Hermione? Tell me! I knew there was something strange about you dumping Ron and then claiming to love Malfoy! We can go to the Ministry, Hermione; we can get you out of this!" Harry said urgently.

She shook her head sadly. "For the sake of Ron's parents, we can't. Malfoy is holding their home in the palm of his hands. If I tell anyone, which I am doing now unless you promise to stay quiet, he will throw them out and destroy the property because he owns it now. If I leave him, he'll do the same. If I do anything to make him angry, he will destroy the Weasley's home. In exchange for letting them stay peaceful in their home, I had to dump Ron and marry him. So please, swear that you won't say a thing!" she said quickly.

Harry stared at her, dumbfounded. He couldn't believe what Hermione had just blurted out. How was he going to keep something like this quiet when everyone hated her and thought of her as a bad person? What about Ron?

Hermione was clearly reading the thoughts on his face. "You can't tell anyone! Swear to me, Harry! On my father's grave, swear to me that you won't tell a living soul what I have told you?!" she pleaded.

Harry was starting to shake his head but he stopped. There was a look of desperation in her eyes that made his heart ache. She had been willing to sacrifice her heart and freedom for a family that she loved just as much as her mother and her father, who was resting in peace. She had always had a great heart that he had admired. The same heart that Ron was still hopelessly in love with despite the situation they were going through.

He was sure that he would've done the same thing had the situation called for it. "Fine," he muttered after a long, tense silence. "I promise—I swear—that I won't tell a living soul about what you have told me," he said as he took her hands in his and pulled her into his arms. "Oh, Mione. I knew that you weren't capable of hurting someone you have loved since our childhood without any reason at all."

Hermione nearly sobbed in relief. She had missed Harry so much. "I did it for the Weasley's. Because Arthur saved my father during the war and I had to do something for them in return! I just couldn't stand by and let them lose their home. It was too late to pay for the debt anyway, because I found out the day that a man was letting Molly know that the lands were owned by a new person."

Harry nodded and stepped back when he heard footsteps. He looked up and his eyes met Zabini's. "What is he doing here?" he asked stiffly.

Blaise looked at Hermione apologetically. "Sorry, Hermione. I just need to use the restroom. I didn't mean to interrupt," he said as he looked from her to Harry.

Hermione just smiled. "I'm sorry I took so long. I had an unexpected guest," she explained brightly.

"Potter," Blaise greeted.

"Zabini," Harry said rather flatly.

"Harry, be nice. He's a good person once you get to know him," Hermione said in a reprimanding tone. "Besides, he's my friend."

Harry looked at her with wide eyes. "You're being friends with him now?" he blurted, as if he couldn't stop the question from leaving his mouth.

She glared at him. "Yes. Do you want to know why? Because my best and only friends deserted me completely!"

Harry scoffed and gave her an incredulous look. "Come on Hermione! What you did to Ron was just plain wrong! What would you have done in our place? If this were the other way around and Ginny had up and left me for Malfoy, whose side would you have taken?"

Hermione was quiet for a moment, and Blaise looked uncomfortable. "Maybe I should go," he said.

"I'm sorry, Blaise. I'll owl you so that we can have lunch soon," she said, hugging him briefly before he left. She then walked with Harry to the study for some privacy. "Everyone thinks I married Malfoy for money. Did they know me so little?" she asked her childhood friend.

Harry gave her a sad look. "That was the only explanation Ron could find to you leaving him out of the blue! You broke Ron's heart, Mione. Now that I know why, I understand. You should have told us what was going on so that we could've found a way to help you! I don't know if you've done more damage than good now."

Hermione swiped at the tears before they fell. "You and I both know Malfoy, maybe even more than other people, Harry. He would've thrown them out of their home and then torched it down before their very eyes. Then he would've rubbed it in their faces that if I hadn't been so selfish, they would've still had their home," she cried.

Harry hugged her when she broke down completely. "I'm here for you, Hermione. Things won't ever be the same again with Ron and Ginny, but at least I'll still be here with you."

Hermione nodded and forced her chest to stop heaving before she began to hyperventilate. She took a few deep breaths before she was able to speak again. "Though I may not look like it, I'm so glad that I have you back, Harry. You're like the brother I never had," she said with a watery smile.

Harry placed a kiss on her forehead. "I'll help you find a way to get out of this marriage, okay?"

She shook her head. "Don't worry about my situation. I know what I'm doing. Malfoy and I came to an agreement a few weeks ago and I won't be married to him for too long."

Her friend's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "How are you ever going to get him to give you a divorce when he went through all this trouble to marry you in the first place?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't want to talk about that now. I need to know something," she said quietly. Harry nodded. "Is Ron really with Lavender now?"

Harry sighed heavily. "They're dating," he replied.

"I know I hurt him," she said.

Harry nodded. "He was a right mess those first few weeks, but he's recovering and he just decided to give Lav a chance."

Hermione wanted to wail like a brokenhearted child, but she supposed that after the way she had harmed him it would be unreasonable to hope that he would keep waiting for her to leave Malfoy and take her back.

Harry patted her hand. "I'm sorry, Mione. But hey, let's talk about something else," he said, noticing the depressed look on her face. She just nodded once. "Did you know that Terry is looking for a new supervisor of your department?" he asked her.

"He's what?" Hermione exclaimed. "I'm supervisor!"

"Well, Ron and I had lunch with Neville and he told us. Has he fired you or did you quit? I thought you loved your job," Harry said with a frown.

Neville was like her personal assistant at the office of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, but as of late had become more like her partner. Terry Boot was their boss because she had refused to take the position when they had offered it to her. She didn't want to take such a responsibility because she wanted to pursue her dream of opening the trauma center. As supervisor, she had hands-on experience in the field, while being boss meant doing much more paperwork.

"I haven't quit and he hasn't fired me! He even gave me the month of vacation I asked for because of my stupid wedding!" she said angrily. "I should go talk to him, shouldn't I?" she asked. Harry nodded. "I'll go get my purse and then I'll go."

"Do you want me to come with you?" Harry asked.

"Won't Ron be there? I don't want you to get into trouble with Ron or Ginny," she said.

"I'm a grown man, Hermione. I can be friends with whoever I want and if they don't like it, they can talk to me about it," Harry said with a grin.

Hermione smiled genuinely for the first time in weeks. "Thank you, Harry," she said, hugging him tightly. "I'll appreciate the company."

Later that evening, Hermione stormed through the Manor, a piece of parchment clutched in her hand. She had gone to the ministry with Harry and had spoken to Terry about the rumors they had heard. Terry had then nervously shown her the letter written in the neat script of her husband, stating that his wife would not be returning to her job so that she could take care of her new husband.

Hermione had thought that her nerves were going to explode in her fury, but Terry didn't deserve the brunt of her wrath. No, she had saved it all for her husband and had let it simmer while she told Terry firmly that she would keep her job and that she was as of then canceling the rest of her vacation time. So she had stayed at work and had not even sent a note to her husband telling him where she was and she knew that he would be beyond angry.

She smiled to herself. She knew that he spent an hour before dinner in the study, going through his documents and organizing them before they went into the Malfoy's personal file room. As she stormed through the door, her magic slamming the doors to either side, he looked up and gave her a dark look.

"Where the hell were you?" he growled.

Hermione smiled with deceptive sweetness. "I went to work," she said, walking over to stand in front of him. "And Terry showed me a very interesting letter," she said as she threw it at his face. "Who the hell do you think you are?" she spat quietly. "I will keep my job because I want to and you are not going to take that away from me as well!"

"You are in no position to make demands, my dear. Have you forgotten so quickly? Have you forgotten who has the power?" he asked her gently, noticing, and not for the first time, that she looked beautiful in her anger. Another reason why he was attracted to her.

"I agreed to all of your sodding demands, but you are not going to keep me isolated from everything that I love! I need to stay at this job because it's what I enjoy doing! Don't you understand that?" she asked.

"You don't need to work," he said in a low tone. "You have everything you needed and more here at the Manor. Why would you want to work?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Did you not hear me?" she snapped. "I love my job!"

"Why? Because the Weasel is there? Haven't you gotten it into your head that he doesn't want anything to do with you anymore? He's replaced you with Brown and still you pine over him?" he asked tauntingly.

She pursed her lips and swallowed the urge to curse him bald. "That is none of your concern," she snapped. "And I told you, you are not going to keep me from doing something that I love."

"Would you like to see me try?" Draco asked as he stood in front of her, eyes angry and flashing an impressive silver.

"Is that a threat?" she snapped, fingering the wand she had attached to her wrist in case he did something threatening.

"Take it as you want, but I will not have you in the same building with Weasley," he said. "I know that they miss you and I will not give them the chance to coax the truth out of you. Weasley's greatest punishment will be knowing that you are mine and that he won't have you again because even if we separate in two years, he will always remember that you were my wife and that you left him for me."

She watched him silently, noticing the gleam of jealousy in his eyes. Could it be that this evil man really felt something for her aside from a bizarre obsession? She would never feel anything for him, and it was worse now. He was trying to take away everything she held dear. "You want to cut me off from everything that I love. Are you doing this to hurt me or them the most?" Hermione nearly yelled.

Draco scowled at her. "You don't need to work! It's unnecessary when you have all this wealth at your disposal."

Hermione was not convinced. All this couldn't be because he was in love with her. She refused to even think it. "This whole blackmailing thing was never about me, was it? You've always been jealous of Ron and Harry, haven't you Draco?" she hissed in fury.

"I am not jealous!" he snarled in her face.

"Really? You've never been jealous of Harry saving the day, of having all the attention? What about Ron? He may have been of a lower class than you but he had fame as well and he had me!"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" he yelled, grabbing her arms and shaking her, making Hermione's teeth rattle.

That was when her instincts kicked into hyper drive, the way that had always kept her alive during the war. She twisted out of his grip and countered it, kicking the back of his knee and forcing him down, her arm encircling his neck and left arm in a painful choke hold.

"I've told you before not to manhandle me. Now I know that you have the strength to overpower me, Malfoy, but I was trained in many arts of combat before the war even began. I work out as well and if I wanted, I would've broken your neck by now," she whispered against his ear.

"I don't hurt women. That's why I don't fight back whenever you assault me physically," he said, trying to calm his rapid breathing.

"I'm sure you don't. But there are many things that you don't know about me. Things that I would like to forget. But when push comes to shove, I revert back to who I was during those years and I don't like that person. She was cold and calculating and she did what was necessary to survive," Hermione said quietly. After a second of silence, she released him.

Draco stared at her, his eyes as cold as arctic ice. He wasn't showing her any emotion or any of his thoughts and Hermione knew in her gut that this was a man who had learned self-preservation during the war as well. She knew very little about him during that time, but she knew that he had been a double agent. The ministry had pardoned his father in exchange for Draco's infiltration of Lord Voldemort's inner circle. Only he himself knew the things he had been forced to do in exchange for his survival and that of his parents.

He stood and straightened his finely tailored clothes. He hadn't said a word to her yet, but his silence was more unnerving than his yells from earlier. He opened his mouth to say something, but they were interrupted by someone clearing their throat from the shadows by the door. Hermione was mortified to see Lucius Malfoy standing there, watching them quietly.

"What is going on?" he asked silkily.

Hermione looked at Draco and let out a small sigh. "I was just telling Draco that I am going back to my job whether he likes it or not. Otherwise I am leaving him," she said, her eyes on the young Malfoy.

"That's funny because I didn't think that there had to be physical assault involved when talking about the said topic," said Lucius.

Draco sneered. "I don't want her working at the Ministry and that's my final decision," he said curtly.

Hermione's eyes sparked with indignation but before she could go off on her husband, her father-in-law interceded. "Come now, Draco. You can't expect to keep a phoenix caged and not watch it die a little every day. The girl needs freedom and companionship from people other than your charming self," he said with a smirk.

Her eyes went wide and Draco gave his father a questioning look laced with anger. "Father, you're not helping," he said flippantly.

Lucius gave him a look that made Draco wonder what his father was up to. "Let her keep her job, son. I'm sure that her boss will accommodate some sort of schedule that won't take up much of her time. She can work part-time," he said slyly.

Hermione scowled. "This is a full time job," she said darkly.

"You're married now; your husband should have your full attention. But since you have a sham marriage, you need to keep up appearances. So go to work in the mornings and then come home in the afternoon to spend time with your husband. Is that something you cannot compromise in? That way you will keep your job and your spouse content."

Hermione didn't like the idea but it was better than being ripped away from a job she loved with coworkers who didn't judge her. She just hoped that Terry was willing to cooperate with her.

"Fine," she said with a heavy sigh. "I'll agree if he agrees."

"Draco?" Lucius asked expectantly.

"I agree as well. As long as she stays away from Weasley at all times and agrees to have lunch with me whenever I wish," Draco said.

"You don't have to worry about Ron," she spat. "He hates me thanks to you, so I seriously doubt that he will stop by to speak to me or even look at me whenever we cross paths," she said angrily.

"Good," Draco said with a smirk. "Oh, and Hermione, dear? This Friday night we will be

attending the opera. I trust you can find a suitable dress for our evening together?" he asked with a sugary smile.

Hermione just huffed and left the room. Draco turned to look at his father. "I seriously want to understand what you are doing," he said.

Lucius smiled smoothly. "You have much to learn about the art of manipulation," he said. "Weasley works at the Ministry, close to your bride. You can take the opportunity to visit her at random moments to show her how much you love her. Try to do it when someone who knows that man is around so that they can spread the rumor or even tell him themselves. She has agreed to be a loving and dotting wife with you whenever in public, right?"

"Yes," said Draco.

"Then exploit that little fact. Drive Weasley farther and farther away. The quicker she disillusion herself with him, the better for you. Remember Draco, time is ticking and you need that heir before the two years are over," said Lucius as he walked towards the door.

Draco watched him until he left and then sunk down into his favorite, nearly worn out leather chair. He had to trust his father's words because the man was the biggest sneak Draco had ever met. So he tried to convince himself that the man knew what he was doing when he had made Draco allow Hermione to keep working. Lucius had been right though. He couldn't keep Hermione caged in. She would die little by little without her freedom. She was a different species than his own mother, who had been groomed to take care of her husband and family on a full time basis. Hermione was an independent woman who was used to working and taking care of herself without the help of anyone else.

That was why he had wanted her so much in the first place. She was unyielding.

Indestructible.

One way or another, he would have her.

Draco scowled to himself as he waited for Hermione on the front steps of the Manor. He was dressed in pricey tuxedo styled robes and he was standing beside a carriage that would take them to the opera. He had plans tonight to get into Hermione's good graces again. Well, at least as much as she would allow him to. Though he hated knowing that she was close to Weasley at her job, he had found it quite amusing to drop in on her at the most unexpected moments. The last two times he had gone to see her, he had stayed by the open door of her office, watching her look through different books and then writing quickly into a black journal. She worked fast and she was a neat freak, he had discovered. Her office was impeccable and she berated Longbottom for having such a mess in his own office which was right next to hers.

He had sent her a bouquet of white lilies, her favorite flower, more than once and had found some in the trash bin and others placed in offices far away from her. He smirked; she was playing hard to get and he had to admit that he loved it. He had just made up his mind to march up to her room and drag her down when she walked out of the door next to his mother and father, who were going with them as well.

Draco stopped to stare at her. She was wearing a red dress that clung to her curves like a

second skin. The top was halter and from her hips down it fell in a long skirt that covered her heels. The material over her small waist was crinkled, and he noticed that she was showing a very impressive amount of cleavage. She was also wearing a large white coat, red hand gloves and glittering diamonds around her neck. Her hair was down in thick waves over her shoulders and down her back and she was wearing make-up that gave her eyes an impression of being slanted.

"Close your mouth before you start drooling," said Lucius as he passed him and helped his mother into the carriage.

Hermione stopped in front of Draco one step higher so that she looked down at him. "Is this to your liking, your highness?" she asked haughtily.

"Very," he said quietly. "Red suits you. You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she muttered. Hermione looked away from his eyes and forced herself to not squirm at the intense look in them. The way he was looking at her was unnerving, but she had to admit that having a man as handsome as Malfoy looking at her that way was thrilling. "We should go," she said.

He nodded and gave her his hand to help her into the carriage. Hermione took it and had to force herself to not snatch her hand back when his warm hand touched hers. As they made their way towards the opera, she rubbed the hand that had touched his against her coat. She hated that it was still tingling. It kept tingling until they arrived and worsened when he helped her down and kept her hand in his as the reporters and photographers for newspapers and magazines tried to ask them questions about their marriage and their postponed honeymoon.

Draco refused to answer questions, but he did make them pose for many photos. He held her gently against him and smirked as the flashes went off. "Smile, darling, smile," he whispered against her ear. Hermione did, but just faintly.

Right behind them, she heard the words Ronald Weasley and she turned, her eyes meeting those blue eyes she had come to love and cherish deeply but that she had hurt beyond anything. His arm was around Lavender's waist and he smiled at her then kissed her for the camera.

Hermione wasn't even aware that there was a tear running down her cheek as Draco pulled her along. He pulled her into a secluded alcove and ran a thumb over her cheek, brushing the tear away. He then brushed her cheek with his lips, a light touch that she barely felt before it was gone.

"This should make you happy," she murmured, pushing down the rest of the tears that were threatening to fall. "The fact that he is breaking my heart the way I did to his."

It did, but he wasn't about to admit it. "The fact that he is moving on so quickly after you should tell you something about him," Draco said just as quietly. "Though you may hate me now for how I did things, just know that I can be your friend as well if you need me."

"I don't need you," she said mulishly.

Draco smirked. "You'll need me soon enough, baby. Just you wait."

Hermione rolled her eyes and pulled him towards the hall leading to the lifts. They of course would have box seats with the very best view. While they walked towards their seats, Hermione noted that her hand hadn't left his and it unnerved her that the feel of his big hand was so comfortable in hers that she hadn't even bothered to let go. Once they were seated, Hermione noticed that to her chagrin Ron and Lavender were right across from them. Lavender kissed Ron's cheek and Hermione felt the tears burn her eyes again just as the show started. The story was beautiful and Hermione couldn't hold in her tears anymore as she dabbed them with Draco's handkerchief.

The play and her memories mingled into one and she thought back to the day she had broken Ron's heart. The day she had broken up with him.

Hermione sighed heavily and took slow steps towards the burrow. Though Ron had his own apartment, he spent time there with his parents and siblings. Molly and Arthur had invited them for lunch and she found that she wasn't there for that. No, she was there to break up with Ron.

She had made up her mind to accept Malfoy and his stipulations. She would marry him and leave behind the man she loved. Her heart had already sunk to her feet even before her eyes fell on him. He was standing in the front yard, petting Buckbeak as the great creature lay in the grass and enjoyed the attention on its feathered head. Harry was there as well.

Buckbeak made a noise of acknowledgement and Ron turned to look at her with a smile. Hermione bowed at the hippogriff until it did the same and she approached, petting its head as well.

"Hey, Mione," Ron said, leaning over to kiss her. Hermione avoided his touch and stepped back. "What's wrong?" he asked with a frown.

"We need to talk," she said. "Can we move away a little?"

Ron nodded and walked with her. "What is it?"

"I—Ron, I'm so sorry, but what I need to tell you is going to be hard on the both of us," she murmured, losing her weak resolve.

"You're scaring me, Mione. What's wrong?" he asked.

"I found someone else," she choked. "We weren't meant to be and I found someone else. I don't want to hurt you but it's best if you and I leave this all behind and move on," Hermione said as tears fell from her eyes.

Ron was pale as he stared at her, not fully understanding what she had said after she had told him she had found someone else. "Who is it?"

"Before I tell you, you need to know that we're getting—we're getting m-married," she stumbled over the word.

"What?" Ron exploded. "Who is it, Hermione? Who did you find?" he nearly yelled, his eyes glassy with tears.

"Draco Malfoy. I'm getting married to Draco Malfoy."

Hermione would never forget the look in his eyes when she had said his name. He had simply turned and left her there. She hadn't gone to the Burrow. She'd had the feeling that she wouldn't be welcomed there.

Draco was watching her now, his eyes narrowed as she dabbed at the tears he was sure had nothing to do with the show. She cleared her throat and looked at him through red-rimmed eyes. "I'll be right back, I need to use the ladies room," she said.

"I'll go with you," Draco started, knowing that she wouldn't allow it.

"I don't need a bodyguard," she hissed before walking off. The lights hit her sensitized eyes roughly and she had to stop by the marble banister to get her eyesight back to normal. Her whole body froze when she heard a gentle voice behind her.

"Hermione?"

"Ron," she said his name softly, almost exhaling it.

"Are you happy, Mione?" he asked when she didn't turn.

Her eyes were swimming with tears again, and that was why she didn't turn. "Yes."

"I still love you," he murmured.

And I still love you. "I—I'm—" she couldn't even form the words over her wildly beating heart.

"You're what?" a new, acid like voice interrupted. She froze and felt her fingers go cold, even inside the gloves. "Tell him, love," Draco said as he stepped up next to her. "You're what?" he repeated. His eyes were flashing with triumph.

She was not going to fall into his game. She refused to hurt Ron anymore. So she parted her peach colored lips to reply even though she didn't know what she was going to say.

Don't kill me please! But the chapter turned out longer than I expected so I had to stop there! I know that many of you readers expressed concerns about my Ginny bashing, but it's not intentional. I just think that she would be the quickest to judge and to say hurtful things before she realizes what she said. Besides, who wouldn't be angry when a woman hurts their brother?

So Malfoy is getting to Hermione slowly, but she's still very much in love with Ron. Harry knows now and wants to help and Lucius is a very sly father-in-law. Now we see where Draco gets it from. I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter and I'll try to update sooner. Thanks for all the reviews for the last chapter, they were great and serve as inspiration for me. Take care everyone!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 4: Anything He Can Do I can Do Better

We built it up

To watch it fall

Like we meant nothing at all

I gave and gave the best of me

But couldn't give you what you need

Hermione glared at Draco angrily, but her eyes were pleading for him to not force her to break Ron's heart again. She wiped at her tears and turned to look at Ron. She had no right to hurt him anymore, but with Malfoy there at her shoulder, there wasn't much she could say to him. Ron looked so handsome and she just now realized that she had missed him so very much.

"You should go back to Lavender, Ron. She'll be wondering where you are," Hermione said quietly. There had been so many things that she had wanted to say to him but none that she could say with Malfoy standing there behind her like some dangerous shadow.

Ron's eyes darted from her to Malfoy, then back to her. He eyed her from head to toe and shook his head once. "You really have settled into your new life easily, haven't you Hermione? I see now that I wasn't enough for you. That you needed more," he said quietly.

Hermione shook her head. "Ron—"

"No, Hermione. Just be honest with yourself. What I was offering was never enough for you, was it? At least not compared to what Malfoy was willing to give you," Ron said spitefully.

Hermione didn't reply, but she was thanking Merlin over and over that Draco hadn't said a thing to make the situation worse. He was watching her closely, wondering what she would say next. Though Ron's words hurt her, she was willing to take it if it made him feel better.

"I'm sorry, Ron. Maybe it was for the best that we ended things while we still had a chance to do so," she said, taking Draco's hand and walking back towards their seats.

"I'm sorry too, Hermione. I'm sorry we ever met," he said before she was out of hearing range.

When they turned into the short hallway leading to their seats, Hermione let go of his hand and stopped, forcing down her tears. Draco watched her and felt a twinge in his heart at the clear distress on her face. "Maybe we should leave," he suggested. Hermione nodded, not trusting her voice. "I'll go tell my parents and then we can go," he said. He was only gone for a few

seconds before he was guiding her outside towards their carriage.

Draco admired her valor. She held in her tears through the whole ride. The only sign of her grief was her trembling bottom lip and her glassy eyes. He touched her hand, her gloved fingers gently, a little surprised when she didn't pull away at his touch. He took her slim hand in his and held it between both of his. When they arrived, he walked her to her room. She had been silent the whole way, though he suspected that as soon as he was gone, she would start to cry.

For some reason, he didn't want to leave her alone in such a state. "Do you want to drink something to make you relax?" he asked her softly.

Hermione shook her head and pulled off her coat, gloves, and heels. Then followed the diamond collar that she carefully placed into its velvet box. "Why are you still here?" she snapped when he didn't move away from his perch on her vanity.

"I don't want you to cry. That sod doesn't deserve your tears after what he said to you," Draco said in annoyance.

"He said them because he's hurt. Did you expect him to forgive me and ask me to be friends with him again?" she asked angrily. "Just leave me alone. I'm tired," she muttered as she pulled out a pair of red flannel pants and a white t-shirt from her dresser.

"I know that you are going to fall apart as soon as I leave and I don't want that to happen," he said as he walked over to stand behind her as she stared at herself in a full-length mirror.

Her eyes narrowed at his reflection behind hers. "Just because I let you hold my hand it doesn't mean that you're now my friend."

Draco laughed abruptly, the deep sound making her stomach flop even as she felt sick because of it. "Please, Hermione. The farthest thing from my mind is being your friend. Especially while you're wearing that dress," he murmured against her ear, breathing her in. She smelled of cherry blossoms and powder.

Hermione moved away from him and nearly tripped over her dress, but his hands were on her hips, gentle yet firm, drawing her in towards him. He was tall, Hermione mused. Her chin barely reached his shoulder without her heels on, and that had been because the heels had given her almost two inches of height. Hermione tried to push away from him, but she had been right to say that he had much more strength than her. Besides, she was feeling curiously immobile as he held her in his arms.

"Why can't you just understand that you mean to me more than just a conquest or a game?" he asked before he ran a hand up her bare back towards the back of her neck.

"Unhand me, Malfoy," she gasped when he pulled her forward forcefully, pressing their chests together. She was nearly bent backwards as she tried to push away from him, but she had to admit that the cologne he was wearing was very appealing. At that very moment as he held her, she didn't think that this was the man who had broken her life into many different pieces. All she knew was that his mouth was coming closer to hers and that she wasn't exactly fighting him.

Draco pressed their lips together and kissed her, a slight tension ebbing out of him when she didn't twist out of his grip or harm him physically the way she had done twice before. He slipped

his tongue into her pliant mouth and heard her make a small noise as it rubbed against hers.

Hermione for her part was in a haze. Her brain was not cooperating with her and she was helpless to Draco's skillful attack. She wasn't even aware that they were no longer standing. He was laying her down on her own bed, his hands moving over her arms, her waist, her stomach, before venturing lower. She wasn't even conscious of the fact that her own hands were in his soft hair. He left her mouth to kiss his way over her neck and collarbone. She was breathing raggedly, her brain still stuck in that haze that she had never felt before. Not even with... with... What had she been thinking about? Hermione couldn't even remember. She gasped as his lips moved to the dip of her cleavage with gentle sweeps of his tongue.

Draco knew deep down that this night couldn't go past any heavy petting. Mostly because she wasn't ready to accept him as her lover, and because she had been distraught when they had started. If they went all the way, she would hate him even more for taking advantage of her. Though he wanted her more than anything, he would be patient, regardless of what his father had said about getting her impregnated as soon as possible. He felt that a child at this moment would be a very bad thing. Besides, he had yet to come to terms with the fact that he needed to become a father in order to get his wife to stay with him forever.

But all those things didn't mean that he couldn't enjoy the moment, he thought as he began to inch her dress up little by little. That was when Hermione froze in his arms, going tense again. "Get off me, Malfoy. Get off me now before I do something we will both regret," she said breathlessly.

Draco swallowed hard and forced his own erratic breathing to normal. He moved up her body to look at her and saw the clear anguish and hurt in her eyes. "I don't want to hurt you," he murmured as he ran a hand over her jaw gently.

Hermione shook her head and a few tears escaped her control. "Don't you understand that you already have?" she asked before she moved off the bed and walked towards her door. She opened it wide and motioned for him to leave. "Leave before you make things worse. I don't want to fight. I'm too tired," she said.

Draco sat up and ran a hand through his hair before standing and making his way out of her room without a word. Hermione shut the door, but no sooner had she done it, there was a knock. Hermione checked to see if she had no more tears on her face before she opened it.

Draco was leaning on the doorframe, watching her. "I forgot to tell you something."

"What?" she asked quietly.

"You looked beautiful tonight. And it's not just me trying to be sly or charming. Red really is your color," he said before turning and walking away.

"Thank you," Hermione muttered before shutting the door again.

Once he was gone, Hermione released a shaky breath before the tears fell. It seemed that for the past weeks all she had been doing was crying. She cried when she looked at the last remaining picture of her and Ron; right before she went to bed; when she looked at the engagement ring he had nearly thrown at her a few days before her wedding to Malfoy, when he had confessed that he had been ready to marry her. It was a true miracle that she wasn't cried

out. She was tired of crying and crying, but all the things that had happened to her gave her the right to cry night and day.

What made her feel worse now was the fact that she had allowed Malfoy to get so far with her tonight. She had even forgotten about Ron when Malfoy's lips had been on her body. She shivered in remembrance and was almost sick. She couldn't betray Ron this way. She couldn't. And it wasn't going to happen again.

Hermione removed her dress and put on her pajamas. Her life was a complete disaster and she had no solution to her problems. She had always been so organized about everything. Her homework, her room, her books, her life. Now everything was a mess and she was so confused. Ron was moving on and she had a feeling that he would most likely end up married to Lavender before her two years with Malfoy were over. And though Malfoy had destroyed everything she had been, he had been acting strange with her for the past few days since their last argument when Lucius had interfered. Since she had returned to work, for the past four days, she had found lilies of her favorite kind waiting for her in the morning. There was no card but she knew who they were from. How he had found out what her favorite flower was, she didn't know. Hermione had simply thrown away the first bouquet, but at Neville's insistence had spared the others. Instead she had split up the bouquets and had given them to random coworkers.

Malfoy would also pop up at her office at random times and would watch her for a few minutes when he thought that she wasn't aware of it. She also knew that he enjoyed terrorizing Neville, because the poor man reverted to the young, nervous, and clumsy boy he had been whenever he came around. Having Draco come around whenever he pleased was getting tiresome. Didn't he have a life? A job? It was unnerving. He was unnerving.

Hermione just couldn't believe that they had snogged on her bed. But snog was such an immature word to use now that she was married to him and that they were no longer teenagers. She was a few months shy of twenty-two and she had to admit that this would be the first birthday she would spend without her friends since she had met them ten years ago. Of course her mother would come over, and so would Harry, but she still felt the empty void where Ron, Ginny, and the rest of the Weasley family had been. And she was loath to admit, even Lavender, who had become a close friend to her once they had graduated from Hogwarts.

As Hermione washed her face free of make-up, she stared at herself in the mirror, spotting a very red mark on her smooth, pale neck. She cursed Malfoy for marking her and retrieved her wand to remove the offending mark. She needed to get to bed.

First thing in the morning, she would get up at dawn to run a mile. She had been neglecting her cardio exercises and it had to stop. For the past four years she and the boys had had a routine of exercise and training so keep their senses sharp and ready for when the war came along. Her spars with Harry and Ron had kept her fighting techniques fresh, but since Ron no longer spoke to her, she would have to find a time and place to practice with Harry. She didn't want to lose her touch, especially with Malfoy lurking around and harassing her when she wasn't in the mood and her patience was wearing thin.

As she lay her head down on one of the many pillows on her bed, she let her eyes slide closed. But this time, she did not see Ron's sad face looking at her, those blue eyes asking her why she had broken his heart like she had every single night since she had broken up with him. No, this time all she could see where a pair of sparkling gray eyes and soft, pink lips. Lips that had made her body sizzle with heat. And Merlin help her, she fell asleep with a smile curling her lips.

She didn't cry herself to sleep that night.

Hermione watched Draco from across the breakfast table, her eyes narrowed slightly in thought. Nearly two weeks had passed since the little episode in her bedroom, and Malfoy had been the perfect gentleman with her. He had taken her out to dinner twice, and sometimes had to drag her out from her office for lunch time as well. To his credit, he hadn't mentioned what had transpired in her bedroom and she was thankful. She didn't need anymore reminders.

Yesterday, she had spent the entire day with her mother, and today she would spend with her mother-in-law. Hermione just hoped that she didn't have to suffer through more endless shopping the way her last two times with Narcissa had been. Though she really enjoyed her company, Hermione simply loathed shopping. The only time she actually liked to do said activity, was when the stores were empty of costumers. She hated crowds and the inevitable shoving and groping that entailed. Especially during Christmas time. Draco wasn't even looking at her. He and his father were reading different sections of the Prophet while they sipped their coffees and there was a boring silence at the table.

Narcissa was watching her as Hermione watched her son. She knew that when she told her daughter-in-law the last bit of news she had, the girl would probably want to jump off of the highest peak of the Manor. But it had taken her a while to convince her son to accept, so convincing Hermione or better yet—trapping—her into the plan would be slightly easier.

Lucius finally set down his paper and stood, giving Narcissa his hand so that she could stand. "Come along darling, we have many things to get done," he said.

"What? I thought that we were going out today," Hermione interrupted. Inside she was jumping in happiness. Now she would get to sulk in her room all day.

Narcissa gave her a rueful look. "I'm sorry, Hermione. But something came up that Lucius and I have to get done today. We'll leave it for next weekend. But I do need you and Draco to pick up a package for me at Flourish and Blott's. Can I trust you two will not kill each other while you retrieve my package?" she asked with a smile.

Hermione looked at Draco and he just shrugged. "Why can't they just deliver the package?" she asked.

The blonde just shook her head. "It's an expensive book that needs to be signed for and given to the hands of a member of the family. Since I cannot go, you and Draco must do this favor for me," she said before turning and walking off with Lucius.

"Your mother is a terrible sneak," said Hermione before taking a sip of her orange juice.

"Now you see where I really get it from," he said with a smirk.

Hermione surprised him and herself with an abrupt, honest laugh. She looked away when he set down his paper and stood. He walked around the table and stopped beside her, giving her his hand much the same way as his father had done only a few minutes ago for his mother. Hermione stared at his graceful, long-fingered hand, with the Malfoy crest ring on his finger for a few seconds. She then took it and they stood.

Draco looked at her from head to toe and smirked. "Don't you ever wear dresses?" he asked in amusement.

She gave him a haughty look. "Do I strike you as the girly-girl type?" she asked as she motioned to her attire. She was wearing a pair of green-grey pants tucked into her knee-high boots and a black turtle-neck with a wide neck. Her black leather and velvet boots had a small, wide heel, so they didn't make her much taller and Draco could look down his nose at her. She'd pulled her hair into a messy yet stylish pony-tail, and she had opted to leave off the make-up, except for a bit of gloss for her lips.

Draco stared at her for a moment, enjoying the way her pants molded to her hips and bum perfectly, highlighting those curves and—"What?" he snapped when she waved a hand in his face.

"Stop ogling my arse!" she snapped, voice high with annoyance, and her cheeks coloring in embarrassment.

"You shouldn't have worn those pants then," he replied as he followed her to the coat closet and she pulled out a long black coat that reached her knees. "You're my wife. If I can't touch then I have a right to look."

"We should go," she snapped as she put on the coat and crossed her arms over her chest grumpily.

Draco smiled. She had no idea how endearing that look on her face was. If she did, she wouldn't make it. She was pouting slightly though her eyes were crackling with fire. It was a very attractive look on her. He saw her eyes narrow as she watched him. He smirked. "Don't be such a child, grumpy," he said before taking her hand and apparating them straight to Diagon Alley.

Hermione wanted to slap him so badly, but then she was very aware that they were now in a public place and there were people stopping to stare and whisper about them. There were a group of school-girls standing by the newspaper and magazine stand who were all talking amongst themselves and looking at her husband as if he were some sort of star or god. She had a sudden flashback to her second year at Hogwarts when she had been star struck with Gilderoy Lockhart. Geez, that had been an embarrassing stage in her life.

"Come on your highness, before they start asking for your autograph," she muttered, pulling him along.

Draco smirked and winked at the girls as they passed by, earning him an elbow in the ribs from his dear wife. "Jealous, my sweet?"

"In your twisted dreams. But we're supposed to be projecting the happy, perfect couple, aren't we?" she snapped.

He draped his arm around her shoulders, watching her grit her teeth. "Tell me something about yourself that I don't know," he said as he slowed their stride and stopped to look at random windows.

"You don't know anything about me, so it would take too damned long," she said, trying to

inconspicuously shrug off his arm from around her shoulders.

"I've got time," Draco said with a teasing lilt to his tone. She didn't budge. "Come on," he cajoled.

Hermione sighed in aggravation. "Fine," she said. "My middle name is Jane and I like lilies."

Draco squeezed her. "I said tell me something I didn't know..... Tell me something about your childhood."

She gave a one shouldered shrug. "I was an only child and while I loved my parents attention, I still felt alone and I always wanted a brother," she said simply.

"You see? That wasn't so hard, was it?" he asked as he kissed her temple and smirked. She looked as if she wanted to wipe the skin he had touched. "That's good to know though. I felt the same way for about a year, but then I got over it. I believe that was when I first met Crabbe and Goyle."

"They were more like your servants than friends or brothers," Hermione said with a shake of her head.

"How would you know? You didn't know me at all back then," he said as they stopped in front of the animal store where they were selling owls, rats, toads, cats, and other strange assortment of animals.

Hermione gave him a look that said that she didn't believe him. "You're telling me that you cared about those two back when you were an even bigger insufferable git?"

Draco nodded. "We spent time at each other's homes during our holidays. Though they are a bit slow-witted, they showed me what it was like to have brother's when I was an only child..... Now, let's move on. Tell me one of your biggest fears."

"I think not," she replied. "Your biggest fears are sometimes hard for you to contemplate on your own. It's even harder to say them to another person. So, I don't think so. What about you?"

"What you said. I guess it's too early in this twisted relationship to ask about our fears..... Alright, your biggest victory?" he asked as he opened the door for the bookstore for her to walk in.

Hermione thought it over for a moment, but then they were in front of the employee and Draco was telling him that they were there to pick up a package for his mother. Her eyes wandered over the many beautiful books and she couldn't contain her giddiness. As she picked up a recent edition of advanced magical spells, she heard Draco snickering behind her. "Look," he said. "You're on the cover of these magazines."

Hermione turned to look and scowled, taking the magazine that read, Hermione Granger, Man Eater? "You are kidding me," she hissed as she turned to the page and noticed who had written it. "Lavender Brown. That cow. She took a page right out of Rita Skeeter's book. She says that the only reason I married you so quickly was because I was either interested in your money, or I had gotten pregnant! She also talks dirt about my past relationships with Krum and McLaggen!"

"You actually had relationships with them?" Draco asked as he looked over her shoulder at the article.

"The former more than the latter. I visited Krum in Bulgaria during sixth year," she said but did not elaborate. "And I bet that was something you didn't know about me."

"Touché," he muttered. "So," he said with a chuckle. "Which one is it? Are you pregnant or do you just want my money?"

Hermione hit him with the magazine before placing it back where it had been. "Sore little chit. She was just jealous that I had Ron longer than she did. But I'll get her for this," she hissed.

"Can I watch if you decide to kill her?" Draco asked eagerly.

"I'm not going to kill her, you dolt. Though I am feeling pretty petty. Do you have any connections at any of these magazines?" she asked him, an evil glint in her eyes.

Draco smiled pleasantly. "Of course I do. You're talking to Draco Malfoy here. I'm the best connected man in our society," he said egotistically. "You want to retaliate with an article about her?"

Hermione nodded. "And don't you dare include Ron in this," she said as the boy taking care of their order came back with a large package. She knew that she was being immature, but Lavender had no right to talk about her that way, and besides she was still holding a grudge about the time Lavender had spent with Ron during their sixth year.

Draco was looking at her as if he had swallowed a spoonful of lemon juice. "Fine," he snapped finally.

"Mrs. Malfoy already paid for the book," the boy said. "So I only need you to sign here that you received it in your hands," he said, pointing to the line in a large, black leather book.

"Thanks," Draco said as he did and then took the package. He turned to see that Hermione was deeply engrossed in her book of advanced spells. "We'll also take that book that she's reading," he said as he handed the man three galleons when he told him the price.

"Would you like me to wrap it up?"

Hermione shook her head and smiled. "No thank you. I'll take it like this," she said before following Draco out the door. "Thank you," she said to him.

Draco shrugged. "That's something else I know about you. You love books more than anything. I suppose you have already read half of the ones in the library?" he asked her.

Hermione shook her head ruefully. "I haven't had the time. I did take a look around and see a few that I really liked. I'll get to them, maybe next week," she said as they continued to walk. "Where are we going now?"

Draco took her hand again and apparated them to the outskirts of Hogsmeade. They were standing under a large, beautiful Weeping Willow next to the lake. The sun was still moving upwards so the weather was not as hot yet. "I'll be right back," he said before leaving her

standing there alone.

Hermione leaned against the tree and nearly jumped when a red and white checkered sheet appeared in the grass with a basket on top. She rolled her eyes and found herself laughing when Draco reappeared, hands free of the package. "What is all this?" she asked, still smiling a little.

Draco shrugged. "I guess we can call this our first actual date. Going to those dinners and to the opera don't count because we couldn't really talk to each other without eavesdroppers. I know we had breakfast about an hour ago, but you barely touched your food and I didn't have much of an appetite myself. We can have tea, or butterbeer, or firewhiskey if you'd like," he said with a smirk as she made a face. "And the elves packed some croissants, scones and banana bread. I think there's more but I didn't really take a close look."

The whole scene was terribly clichéd, but she hated to admit that Ron had never done anything remotely close to this. Sure, they had gone out on romantic dinners, but at her insistence. Ron didn't have a romantic bone in him. Hermione grimaced. She needed to stop comparing the beautiful thing she'd had with Ron to her forced marriage to Malfoy.

Draco patted the spot next to him and she eyed him when she sat across from him, keeping her distance. She took out a croissant and a butterbeer. It was a strange combination, but all in all it didn't taste that unpleasant. "You know, you didn't answer my question about your greatest victory," Draco said as he had a piece of banana bread. "This is my favorite kind of bread," he said absently.

Hermione smiled slightly, but then sighed heavily. "I don't think I have a greatest victory yet," she admitted. "I think that if I would've been able to marry Ron and make him happy, that would've been my greatest victory. I don't think it's going to happen anymore, but it was a good dream while it lasted."

Draco just looked at her and for the first time since he had come up with his plan of trapping her into their marriage, he felt a pang of remorse. She wasn't happy, but he had great doubts about Weasley making her happy as well. He wanted to make her happy. He wanted to make her see that he wasn't with her just to up one on Weasley. She meant something special to him and wanted her to know.

"Haven't you stopped to think that maybe you weren't destined to be with Weasley? That maybe it was written somewhere that you and I would eventually end up together?" he asked her.

Hermione scoffed. "There's no such thing as destiny. We forge our own futures with our actions, Draco. Nothing is predetermined," she said.

Draco just shrugged and let it go. He didn't want to end up in an argument with her over something so trivial. He laid back on his elbows and looked at her for a long moment, watching her fidget with the book in her hands. "I was struck by a snake once, when I was about eight years old," he said.

Her eyes widened. "And you survived it?" It was a very unintelligent question because he was very obviously sitting in front of her thirteen years after the said accident. To his credit, he didn't tease her about it.

He just nodded. "My father had a pet snake, which happened to be poisonous. To this day we don't know how it got out of its home, but it did. I was sleeping in my room when it struck me. I just screamed loud enough to wake the dead and my father came into the room in seconds. I think that was the first time he had carried me or actually touched me since I was an infant. He floo'd us straight to Mungo's, and let me tell you that he was dressed in his pajama pants and a robe, nothing more. The healers took me in quickly and were able to counter the poison before it spread completely in my body. I was out like a light for many hours.

"My mother told me that my father just left to change his clothes and then returned. He spent the night watching over me and sent my mother home to get some rest. I remember that he was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes. That was the first time I ever saw him smile at me, and the last."

Hermione frowned. "Did you find out how the snake got out?"

"No, but I suspect that my aunt Bella had something to do with it. She was staying at the Manor with my uncle Rudolphus for a few days. Though no one ever proved a thing," he replied.

Hermione smiled slightly. "You risked your life for your father's freedom. Your parents mean a great deal to you, don't they?" she murmured. He just shrugged noncommittally. She said deeply before her next words. "My mother is all I have left. My father died from a muggle illness almost two years ago. Even when he was dying, all he could think about was our well being. I miss him," she admitted, her voice cracking. She didn't want to cry. She didn't want to cry.

Draco just watched her as she forced her tears down and took a deep steadying breath. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said quietly.

She nodded and took a sip of her butterbeer. "I miss my father, Draco," she said.

He scooted over and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Nothing I can say will make the pain go away, but he's resting. He's not in pain anymore and I'm sure that your father wouldn't want you to be crying for him. He would want you to remember him before his illness, a strong healthy man who gave you the best memories of your life. A man who was always there for you and your mother. I can wager that he was a hundred times a better father than Lucius," he said with a small grin.

Hermione stared at him. "You're being terribly nice to me," she said.

"And I'm not pretending. You see? You've learned something more about me. That I can be honest when I really try."

At his words she laughed, feeling a great weight lift off her shoulders. She leaned back to lay flat on the ground, forcing Draco to remove his arm from around her shoulders. "What are your plans for the future?" she asked him.

Draco laid back as well, their heads touching slightly. "I want to have kids," he said, missing the look on her face. "Contrary to what my father says that having an heir is an obligation to continue the line, I want to know what it is like. I know I can be a good father; better than my own."

Hermione gave an unladylike snort. "Don't even think that you'll be having those kids with me,"

she said abruptly.

"And why the hell not? You're my wife!" he snapped.

"We'll be divorced in two years, either way. Find some other woman to get pregnant."

"I don't want just any woman as the mother of my children. Besides, I want them born under wedlock."

"Well, marry someone else and get her pregnant as many times as you'd like. I'll be happy to sign the divorce papers for you whenever you'd like."

"Haven't you been paying attention?" Draco asked in irritation. "I don't want just any woman as the mother of my offspring. I want my wife to be the mother. I want you, specifically you, Hermione Granger, to be the mother of my children."

"It's not going to happen in this lifetime," she informed him.

Draco smirked and leaned up on one elbow. "Remember that I still have a lot of time to convince you to change your mind," he murmured, giving her a playful look.

She gazed at him coolly, watching as he began to lean towards her. Hermione stopped him with a hand on his chest before their lips touched. His eyes were a dark grey because of the deep burgundy dress shirt he was wearing under a black jacket. Her own eyes narrowed as she stared at him, the very tips of his fringe brushing against her cheekbones.

"You've been taking many liberties with me these past few days," she said.

He just chuckled softly, and then said, "Just one kiss."

"That won't mean that I like you."

"I'll live," he said before his lips descended on hers.

It was the single longest kiss she had ever received.

By the time Hermione and Draco returned to the Manor, the lunch hour had passed. As they stepped into the sitting room, they found Narcissa entertaining a guest. Hermione stood back and watched as a beautiful blonde woman with green eyes stood and smiled ruby-red lips at Draco. She was all curves and classy beauty, and Hermione despised her on sight.

Her own eyes darkened when Draco walked over to the blonde and hugged her as if she was a long lost lover, and maybe she was, Hermione mused. Narcissa motioned her over and the brunette walked over slowly. "Hermione, this is Daphne Greengrass, an old friend of Draco's," she said.

Hermione and Daphne sized each other up without a word. Then a look of disdain passed over the blonde's pretty face. "Merlin, Draco. How could you marry someone like her? I mean, it's bad enough that she's a Gryffindor, but look at her," Daphne said.

Hermione gasped in indignation and was already taking a step forward before Draco wrapped her tightly in his arms. To the two other women in the room it would've looked like a loving embrace he had her in, but the look on her face was livid, so it ruined the effect. "Respect my wife, Daphne. It's for your own safety that I am telling you," he said, slowly releasing Hermione.

"I don't appreciate you insulting me in my own house," Hermione said, voice tight with anger.

Daphne shrugged elegantly and smiled at Draco as she sashayed over to him and ran a hand up and down his chest. "I think you and I need to get reacquainted, Draco. It's been so terribly long since I last saw you," she said with a pretty pout.

Hermione scowled when Draco didn't move away. He merely smirked and looked intrigued. "How long are you going to be staying in London?" he asked.

"A few weeks, then my dear husband and I will be going back to New York," she replied, flipping the long, shining strands of her golden hair over her shoulder. "Why don't you and I go out for lunch? Your wife can come if she wants," said Daphne.

Draco just shook his head before Hermione had a chance to insult her as she turned down the offer. "She'll be fine here. I'm sure she has many things to do," he said instead.

Hermione felt her blood begin to simmer. Why the presumptuous sod! How dare he make decisions for her? Then an idea began to form in her mind, so she merely smiled and nodded. "Oh yes. I have many things to get done today, so I wouldn't be fortunate enough to enjoy your company," she said snidely before turning and leaving the room completely.

Narcissa gave her son a look of disgust before he shrugged and left with Daphne as well. She just hoped he knew what he was doing by making Hermione angry.

As the sun began to set, Hermione found that Draco had not returned from his little date with Greengrass. She was pacing her room, her plan still floating through her head slowly. If he wanted to play rough, she could play rough. She hadn't survived years with two males as her best friends for nothing. She marched over to the hearth and grabbed a handful of floo powder, shouting her destination.

Hermione smiled when Blaise popped up. "Hello, Hermione," he said with an easy grin. "To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"Good evening, Blaise. I was wondering if you would like to take me to dinner this evening?" she asked with a smile.

Blaise raised his eyebrows in question. "Where is Draco?"

"He's out entertaining Daphne Greengrass and I don't feel like staying home alone while he goes off with that snake in the grass," she said petulantly.

Her friend smiled. "Fair enough. Shall I pick you up at seven? I have a VIP invitation at that brand new Italian restaurant that just opened in Muggle London. Pansy Parkinson owns that one," he said.

Hermione looked intrigued. "How about we meet there?" she asked. He nodded. "I will see you then. I have only forty-five minutes to get ready."

"Until then, my sweet," he said before disappearing from the flames.

Hermione grinned and stood, running over to take a very quick shower before doing her hair and getting dressed. She was done in record time with everything. Even her hair didn't offer any hindrance. She looked herself over in the mirror and smiled haughtily to herself. She was dressed in a black, satin dress that covered her cleavage completely, but was completely exposed in the back. She was showing skin from her shoulders to the small of her back with only a satin sash tying the two ends together. The dress reached her knees and she was exposing toned legs, black heels adorning her feet. Her hair was in an elaborate twist held in place by many butterfly pins.

Draco, if you could only see me now, she thought to herself before grabbing her purse and walking out of her room. If he wanted to play hardball with her, she was game. She just wondered how in the hell she was supposed to believe that he was being serious about her when he left with another woman. Hermione walked down towards the atrium and was stopped when Lucius stepped out of the study.

"Where are you going? Meeting Draco somewhere?" he asked her.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'm going out with a friend," she said as she took out her black coat and pulled it on, her back to her father-in-law. "Draco is out with an old friend of his who came to visit, so I decided that I did not want to stay here while he goes out and has the time of his life with some wench," she said darkly.

"What should I tell him if he returns before you are back?" Lucius asked her in that scornful voice of his.

Hermione turned to look at him. "Tell him that I am having dinner with Blaise Zabini and that I don't think he should wait up for me," she said with a smirk before apparating to her destination.

Lucius raised pale eyebrows and wondered what the hell was going on with those two fools. There would be an explosion when those two returned and saw each other again. He should prepare Narcissa for the confrontation that would sure be very bothersome. He just fervently hoped that none of this reached the media.

How did everyone like this one? Things are heating up between Hermione and Draco and it's all about to hit the fan. I just want to thank everyone who reviewed the last chapter, even though I know that the alert wasn't working. I hope everyone has a great weekend and I can't wait to read what you thought about this chapter!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 5: The Jealous Type

You walked away

You stole my life

Just to find what you're looking for

But no matter how I try

I can't hate you anymore

It was past midnight when Hermione returned to the Manor. She'd had the best of time with Blaise and had even had a moment to speak to Pansy, who had treated her with respect and civility. They had gotten along so well that Hermione had promised to return soon to try the dark chocolate mousse and the champagne so that they could talk.

Hermione pulled off her heels before she took the steps. Though she could easily apparate to her room now that she was a Malfoy, she felt she needed the exercise. She loved to run in the mornings, but she found that a little extra walking didn't hurt anyone. As she reached her room and opened the door, she felt rather than saw him behind her. She moved out of the way just as he reached for, avoiding his grip.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Draco snarled.

Hermione walked into her room and placed her purse on the vanity, keeping her wand in her hand as she moved towards her closet. "Yes," she replied. "I do happen to own a watch."

"You're my wife and I don't like the idea of you parading yourself in public with another man," he said, walking in after her.

"Well, I did tell your father where I was going and with who. Besides, you left me here to parade yourself with some other woman. Why couldn't I do the same? Besides, Blaise and I went to see Pansy's new restaurant. We weren't doing anything out of the ordinary," Hermione said as she pulled the pins out of her hair. She then stood with her back to him, only turning her face to him. "Do you like this dress on me, Draco?" she asked sweetly.

He scowled at her and clenched his hands painfully tight. Though he was angry, he had to admit that she looked splendid in that form-fitting black dress. She really did have a fine looking arse. "I don't want you seeing Blaise Zabini alone."

Hermione turned to fully face him and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't want you seeing Daphne Greengrass alone either."

They stared at each other for a moment and Draco scoffed. "Why? Are you jealous?"

"No," she said without hesitation. "But whatever you do, I can do. If you go out with an old friend, then so will I. You and I are equals. There's no such thing that because you are the

husband and a man you can do what you want. It's chauvinistic and unfair, and those are two things I hate."

Draco glared at her. "Can't you see that Zabini wants more than just to be your friend?"

"Don't you see that the same goes for that woman? She insulted me in my face, for crying out loud. She's conceited and rude and I don't like her. I don't care that she's your friend but I do not want to see her here whenever I am around," Hermione said darkly. "Besides, Blaise isn't going to get anything out of me, and it's not because of the pre-nup. It's because I am not the cheating type, Draco."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be. There's nothing serious going on between us anyway. I don't love you and you know that and I highly doubt that you love me. You may confuse lust with love, but it's not the same. We may not be in love with each other, but I do demand respect from you. If you give me respect, I will return it," she said softly. "If not, all you have to do is draw up the divorce papers. I'll gladly sign them any time."

"I'm not letting you go before our two years are over. Get that into your head," he said as he moved to stand in front of her. "I am a jealous and possessive man, you know this already. If I see that Zabini is inappropriate with you, then I will not stand idly by and let him get away with it. It's on you whether you want to see him get hurt or not."

Hermione smiled pleasantly. "I hate you."

"Right now, the feeling is mutual," he said before he walked towards the door. Before he stepped out, he paused but did not turn. "The next time you leave with Zabini like this, I will go out to look for you and I will bring you back by any means necessary. Then I will hurt him," he said, ducking the high-heel that was aimed with deadly accuracy towards his head, before shutting the door after him.

Hermione stared at the door and his quiet threat still rung in her ears. Well, at least he hadn't threatened her physically and that was always a plus. Merlin, where had the Draco from the past afternoon gone? He was gone now, in a wave of possessive fury, she reckoned as she changed and got ready for bed. She wasn't one to be controlled. Never had been and never would be.

Draco scowled to himself. Hermione was giving him the cold shoulder. She'd been giving him the silent treatment for a week now and he was getting angry. She was acting as if he didn't have a right to demand things of her, as if they weren't married. They were at the breakfast table and like the past five mornings, she was speaking to his mother and hadn't even given him a passing glance.

"When will you be coming back from your trip?" Lucius asked as he finished his dark coffee and sat back to look between his son and daughter-in-law. He'd noticed that things had been tense for the past few days since she had gone out with Draco's old friend. He supposed Draco hadn't told her anything yet and the boy was leaving later that day.

Draco finished chewing on the piece of cantaloupe in his mouth and swallowed. "I don't know

yet. I believe I will be in Athens for four days, and then I will go to New York for the rest of the trip," he said to his father.

"Why aren't you taking Hermione?" his mother asked, noting the way the girl's eyebrows forked in annoyance.

"This is a business trip, mother. I'm not going sightseeing. Besides, she'll be better off here by herself. Keep an eye on her, will you father? I don't want her getting the family into trouble," he said.

"Don't worry. I'm quite sure Hermione knows how to behave herself while in public," came Lucius' reply.

Hermione just sipped her coffee as if she hadn't heard a word Draco or his father had said; she was ignoring his presence completely. Though it was a bit of a surprise that he was going to be gone for two weeks, she didn't know what else she felt about that. She wasn't going to miss him, heavens no. But she had become accustomed to seeing him at the office from time to time, and giving away the flowers he always sent her. Not to mention his playful jabs and his quick wit.

She nearly choked on her coffee as she found herself admitting that she would indeed miss him while he was gone for two weeks. "If you'll excuse me, I have some important things to do," she said, standing and walking away from the breakfast table.

Narcissa turned to Draco. "What did you do to her?" she asked accusingly.

Draco scowled. "Nothing. We had a fight a week ago about her going out with Zabini. She hasn't talked to me since. Personally I think that she's taking this little spat too far," he said in annoyance.

"You have to fix the situation, Draco. You can't just leave two weeks without another word towards her," his mother said.

He shrugged. "Maybe it's what we both need. Two whole weeks without being at each others throats. She'll have time to cool down and I'll have time to think about what I'm going to do when I come back."

Lucius smirked. "Bring her something back. Jewelry maybe, or a designer dress."

"She has many already, and she's not a fan of jewelry," Draco said. "She doesn't really like gifts. She gives away the flowers I send her at work."

"Well, you have to do something to make peace with her," Lucius snapped. The younger Malfoy just nodded. He would miss his Gryffindor while he was out of the country. He just hoped that when he came back she wouldn't be so angry at him anymore.

"Hermione?"

She jumped and turned to look at who was standing behind her. "Harry," she said happily, hugging him tightly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her with a grin.

Hermione turned to look back at the Burrow. She was standing in the backyard, just staring at the house and working up the courage to actually go inside to speak to Molly. "I wanted to go inside to see Molly, but once I reached this spot, my legs just stopped working," she replied.

Harry smiled and squeezed her shoulders. "It's up to you, Mione. I just have to warn you that Mrs. Weasley is still angry at you for what happened between you and Ron, so I don't think she'll be too happy to see you."

She nodded. "I figured as much," she said as she ran a hand through her hair long, loose hair. She was wearing a forest green jumper with her favorite jeans. She wasn't in the public eye, so she was allowed to wear whatever she wanted. "But I guess I have to do this sometime. Will you go in with me?"

Her long time friend nodded and smiled. "I'll go in with you," he said as they began to walk up the path.

"Oh, Harry dear. Ginny went to go buy some things at Diagon Alley, but she'll be back pretty soon....." Molly trailed off when she saw who was standing next to Harry. "You're not welcome here. You need to leave," she said curtly.

Hermione felt like a bludger had just hit her in the gut. She had been steeling herself for those words, but they still cut to the deep to hear them. "Molly, please. We need to talk," she pleaded.

"No," said the woman. "You hurt my son more than you can ever know and you are not welcome here."

"Molly, all of you are my family just as much as my own mother!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Listen to her, Molly. She's not a bad person," Harry interceded.

"Ginny will be angry with you if she sees you with Hermione," Molly said.

Harry shook his head. "I love Ginny, Molly. But Hermione is like my sister and I cannot abandon her. I know she has her reasons for marrying Malfoy and the last thing she wanted to do was hurt Ron."

"Harry, don't. I'll just leave because I don't want to cause you trouble. I already told you that," Hermione said sadly. She'd been so wrong to come here, but it was something she had needed to do. She had needed to see Molly and apologize for leaving Ron, even if she wasn't granted forgiveness. "Molly, I'm sorry that I hurt Ron, I will never get tired of apologizing, and I'm sorry that you are hurting because of what I did to your son too. I love you guys, nothing is going to change that."

Molly shook her head. "Leave Hermione. Ron has been grieving over what you did to him and I just want you to know that I regret the day he met you."

"Molly!" Harry said incredulously. "Haven't you stopped to wonder why the new owner of this land hasn't thrown you out of it?" he nearly yelled.

"Harry!" Hermione said, slapping a hand over his mouth. "You promised me!" she cried before running out of the house.

"She's not a bad person, Molly," Harry said before he ran after Hermione. He caught her just as she was approaching the apparition point. "I'm sorry, Mione. But I couldn't let her treat you that way!" he said quickly.

"You promised not to say a thing, Harry! Malfoy will throw them out if you do and then my sacrifice will be for nothing!" she nearly yelled at him. She noticed the look on his face and hugged him. "I'm sorry. I love the fact that you want to be my big brother, but I don't need you to save me here. Remember that Hero complex we spoke about during our sixth year? This is what is happening. You don't have to be the hero all the time," she murmured.

Harry nodded in understanding and hugged her again. "The only hero here is you, Mione. They just don't know you are," he said with a heavy sigh. "How about we go to lunch on Friday?"

Hermione nodded and smiled. "That would be great. Come over to the Manor and we'll eat there. Thank you for being here for me, Harry. I love you."

"I love you too. Take care of yourself," he said before she apparated away. He sighed heavily and wondered when Hermione would find peace again. He had almost blurted her secret because he had seen the pain in her eyes when Molly had said those words to her. He had felt the need to protect her because he honestly saw her as his little sister, even though she was a few months older than him. He turned and began to walk back towards the Burrow, wondering when his girlfriend would be back.

To Hermione's opinion, the two weeks Draco was gone seemed to pass by too fast. Before she knew it he was back and pestering her once again. When she got home from work and an hour of training her combat moves with Harry, he was sitting in the study with his father, talking over numbers. She was in a very simple red dress that mimicked a very long dress shirt with a wide belt around her small waist. Her hair was up on one side and she was wearing red sandals. Draco had stepped out and looked her up and down, his eyes lingering in the line of exposed flesh of her chest because she had left the top three buttons undone.

"Hermione," he greeted.

"Draco," she said simply, turning to walk away.

"I'm sorry," he said before she walked away completely. That stopped her.

"For what?" she asked as she turned to look at him, standing at the foot of the stairs.

"For the way I behaved before I left; for what I said," he murmured as he stepped towards her. "I was a complete idiot."

"Yes you were," she agreed, gazing up at him. "How was your trip?" she asked as they walked up the stairs.

"Successful," he said with a smirk. "I did all that I wanted to do. I will be opening five stores of Quidditch Supplies and custom made robes in different countries. Before we married, I had

visited three other countries. This trip was tying up the loose ends of my other two stores."

Hermione smiled when she noted the pride in his voice. "You will have reasonable prices won't you?" she asked him. "Because, there are people who cannot afford brand name robes or expensive brooms."

"We are appealing to every demographic," he said with a nod. "There are different price ranges for everyone. High quality at a considerable price."

She nodded, thinking about how Ron and his family had been when they had been kids. The Weasley's hadn't been poor, but they had never been able to afford new things for every single member of the family. "When are the grand openings?" she asked.

"Next week. We will celebrate it at the store located in Diagon Alley. The party is almost set and the invitations were sent out last week. I will also be attending the openings of the other four stores the week after the first one," Draco said. Hermione nodded and looked at him expectantly. "How did you spend your time while I was away?" he asked as they walked into her room and he sat on her bed.

"Work, of course. I also went out a few times with your mother and..... I made peace with Pansy Parkinson," she said proudly.

Draco looked surprised. "Really? How did that happen?"

Hermione shrugged. "When Blaise and I went to her restaurant, she was polite and pleasant with us. Yesterday, Harry and I were there for lunch and she sat down with us to have lunch. We had a great time and got to talking," she replied.

"You made up with Saint Potter as well? Dear me, what is this world coming to?" he asked mockingly.

She shot him a glare. "Don't start," she threatened with a picture frame sitting on her nightstand, framing a picture of her mother and father. "I'm in a good mood today."

He nodded and stopped her when she sat next to him to remove her sandals. "I bought you something in New York," he told her as he pulled out a flat, red velvet box from his pocket.

Hermione stared at it and frowned. "You know that I don't like jewelry and I only wear it because I have to," she said.

Draco nodded. "I know. But I think you'll make an exception with this one."

Hermione took the box from him and opened it, her eyes widening as she looked at the piece of jewelry inside. Sitting in a bed of red velvet was a silver chain and pendant. It was round and roughly the size of a galleon, maybe smaller and much flatter, and on the front was a beautifully engraved lion.

"Flip it over," said Draco quietly, watching her eyes as she looked at his gift. She had no real idea of how beautiful she was when she smiled like that, when her eyes weren't filled with anger or hate.

Hermione turned over the pendant, completely oblivious to the look on Draco's face, and found that on the back of the lion, there was a Chinese symbol engraved into the silver as well. "What does it mean?" she asked him.

"It's the symbol for bravery," he said, taking it out of the box in her hands and undoing the clasp. "May I?" he asked.

She nodded and turned her back to him, moving her hair out of the way as he reached around her and placed the chain around her neck, closing the clasp. Hermione froze but said nothing when she felt his lips on the back of her neck, gentle and warm before he moved her hair back in its place. Hermione turned back to him and smiled. "Thank you. It's lovely," she said.

"I'm glad you like it. Now, how about we go to lunch so that I can tell you about the magazine article that is coming out next week entitled, 'Lavender Brown Has Some Big Shoes to Fill.' The article doesn't bash your precious Weasel, but it does talk many a things about Brown and how she's always been jealous of your talent and Weasley's love for you. And can you possibly guess who wrote it?"

Hermione smiled evilly. "Who?" she asked as they walked out of her room and down to the Atrium.

"Our old friend, Rita Skeeter," he said with a smirk.

Hermione watched impatiently as guests began to walk into the grand opening of Draco's store. The establishment was by no means a small one, but it had been enlarged to fit a completely separate hall where there were tables and where the party would take place. Afterwards, the guests would be allowed to get into the store to see the merchandise and to order anything custom-made. She was only thankful that Draco hadn't made it a friggin' black and white affair or something just as formal.

As it was, she was in a pair of beige slacks that covered a pair of dark-beige colored boots, and a beige cashmere halter top that glittered around the cleavage it was showing. Complimenting the outfit was a small, knit sweater that didn't quite reach her waist, but was as soft as the cashmere. She also wore her hair in a high pony-tail with big curls that trailed down her back. She hadn't taken off the chain that Draco had given to her a few days ago.

Narcissa was standing next to her while they watched Draco and Lucius speak to the guests and the few reporters who had been allowed to cover the event. The woman next to her, as always, looked cool and composed as she gazed her cold gaze around the room. The only moment that her look warmed a bit was when she was looking at her two men, husband and son, as well as when she looked at Hermione.

"You made up with Draco?" she asked Hermione softly.

Hermione just shook her head. "As much as he and I can. He's been nice to me these past few days."

"He's jealous of Blaise," Narcissa stated out of the blue.

The brunette looked at her. "What?"

"You heard correctly. Hermione, why can't you see that my son is in love with you? No man would've stayed by your side, taking all the rejection and insults on your part even if he returns them! He's desperately in love with you but he will not admit it until you do, or you decide to really leave him. Blaise has always been a close friend of Draco's, don't drive them apart over some petty way of making Draco jealous," Narcissa said to her.

Hermione could only blink. She hadn't been using Blaise! Well, she had to resist shuffling her feet, maybe on some level she had been using Blaise to make Draco jealous, but that was just a plus from their friendship. She really liked the ex-Slytherin. He made her laugh and smile with his jokes and stories, and he didn't judge her for what she had done to Ron. Blaise was her friend.

"I don't want that, but Blaise and I are friends as well," she said before Pansy approached them, followed by Millicent Bullstrode, Crabbe, and Goyle. They said hello to Narcissa and then to Hermione. "It's good to see you all here," Hermione said honestly.

Pansy smiled. "We wouldn't miss this for the world. Did you know that Draco has wanted to do this since he was eleven years old?" she asked Hermione.

"Really? No, I didn't know that," she said with a small shrug. "But has there ever been something that he wants that he hasn't been able to get?" she asked wryly.

"Well, he finally got you, so I guess there isn't," Pansy stated with a smirk.

Hermione's eyes narrowed in contemplation at the comment but then more guests arrived and Draco walked over to them, taking Hermione's hand. "Excuse us, but I need to steal Hermione away for a moment. Come along darling, the press wants to interview us together," he said as he pulled her along.

"They should be covering the event, not probing into our married life," she said in annoyance. "You know how much I hate reporters."

Draco shrugged. "You know quite well that it's better to have them as your friends than your enemies. Just answer a few questions and then excuse yourself because you just saw your mother-in-law motioning you over," he said.

Hermione just rolled her eyes and nodded. She hated parties and reporters, but she understood that in order for Draco's business to be successful, they had to be good to the media. So she endured almost half-an-hour of questions—because let's face it, she had nothing better to do—for Draco, because he had been acting so nice to her and he hadn't made her life a complete hell for the past few weeks.

Then her eyes fell on the one person who had made her day. Harry. She leaned over to Draco. "You invited Harry?" she murmured to him, her lips curling into a happy smile.

He nodded and felt his heart skip a beat when her eyes filled with happiness as she looked at him. She had never looked at him that way before. He wasn't even aware that the reporters were taking pictures of him with that look on his face as Hermione smiled. In that moment, they looked like the happy couple he had reminded her they had to be in public. She then blushed prettily and excused herself before approaching her best friend, who she now noted was

accompanied by his girlfriend.

Harry looked up at her and waved, a smile on his handsome face, but before Hermione could get close to them, she was intercepted by one Blaise Zabini. He grinned at her and kissed her hand. "There you are, I've been looking everywhere for you," he said.

Hermione smiled. "How are you, Blaise? Do you like the party so far?" she asked.

He nodded and looked around. "I do, and from what I can see of the store, it's going to be a big hit," Blaise said as he looked around at the people who were still arriving. The celebration would begin in just a few minutes. "Can we take a walk?" he asked, motioning towards where the merchandise was located.

Hermione turned to look for Draco, but his attention was held by the guests and friends. She then looked at Harry and motioned for him to wait, that she would be with him in a few minutes. She led the way into the store until the noise dimmed down a bit. "So, what did you want to talk about?"

He stared at her for a long moment until she started to feel a bit nervous. "Hermione, I—you look beautiful tonight," he said, stopping whatever he had been about to tell her. "In fact, every time I look at you and see you smile, something inside me twists," he whispered.

"Blaise, please," she said uncomfortably.

"I know," he said with a heavy sigh. "I don't want to jeopardize my friendship with both you and Draco."

"I don't want to cause a rift between you and Draco either. But if this is going to interfere with our friendship then maybe we shouldn't go out anymore. I don't want to feed your attraction and I'm not looking to cheat on my husband," she said gently, excluding the fact that she couldn't cheat even if she wanted to.

Blaise nodded, looking embarrassed and endearing. "I'm sorry, Hermione. It was stupid of me to even say anything," he muttered.

Hermione smiled sympathetically. "As long as we're clear that all I want from you is your friendship, we're fine." He smiled and took her hand, kissing her knuckles gently.

"I do believe that it's frowned upon for a married woman to be alone with a man who isn't her husband," said someone from behind her.

Hermione whirled around and her eyes met Cormac McLaggen's. He was as tall as she remembered him, and handsome, but he still had that arrogant air about him he'd had when they had gone on that first disastrous date.

"I guess it would be even more frowned upon if I were alone with two men," she replied curtly.

Cormac just smiled and took her other hand and kissed it. "You're more beautiful than ever, Hermione," he said with a suggestive grin.

"I guess being married has done me well, hasn't it?" she asked, extricating her hand slowly.

"What are you doing here? I didn't know you and Draco got along like friends," she said, stepping closer to Blaise. She didn't like that look on Cormac's eyes one bit.

"We're not," a new voice said. They all turned to look at Draco, who gave the other two men unfriendly looks. "We're just acquaintances; business men," he said as he took Hermione's hand and entwined their fingers. "What are you two doing over here with my wife?" he said, accentuating that one word.

"We were just talking away from the noise," said Blaise.

"And I just happened upon them alone," said Cormac evily.

Hermione's eyes narrowed and she felt Draco stiffen beside her. "We weren't doing anything wrong," she said defensively.

Draco let out a long breath before speaking. "Both of you let me tell you one thing, and one time only. Hermione is my wife and she is off limits to any man but me. You will treat her with respect or suffer the consequences," he said before leading her back towards the party.

"I didn't know Malfoy was the jealous type," said Cormac mockingly.

Blaise shot him a glare. "He's not. He's the possessive and action-taking type. He doesn't take kindly to anyone looking at his wife the way you were," he said.

Cormac merely smirked. "You mean the way you were watching her too? Come now, Zabini she's an eyeful, and I could care less that she's married to that pointy-faced git. She deserves better."

"And you think you're better?" asked Blaise.

"Naturally."

"Aren't you married as well?"

"That's irrelevant."

"Lay a hand on her and you won't just deal with Draco and Potter, you'll deal with me as well," Blaise threatened softly before he walked away from the tall man.

Cormac merely smiled to himself and sighed. There wasn't anything that he couldn't get and right now he wanted Hermione Granger for himself. She was what he had wanted for a very long time. But she had moved from Weasley to Malfoy. He would have her if it was the last thing he did. Everything and everyone else be damned.

Hermione stopped Draco before they reached the crowd again. "Draco?" she asked.

"What did I tell you about being alone with Zabini?" he asked quietly.

She licked her lips and cleared her throat. "We were just talking, so please don't make a scene. Then Cormac came over and he was looking at me as if I was something tasty and he was

hungry. It was disgusting really," she said with a scowl.

"You mean the same way Zabini looks at you when he thinks that no one is watching him? Come now, Hermione. Don't give me that look. I've seen him myself," Draco snapped.

"Are you jealous?" she asked.

He was quiet for a moment. "Yes," he murmured. "Am I not allowed to be?" he whispered against her ear.

"Of course not," she replied. "There's nothing to be jealous of because I already told you that I'm not the cheating type. Why do you think I was sorted into Gryffindor?" she asked him haughtily, shaking the long curls of her hair off of her shoulders.

"Gryffindor for life," Draco said with a chuckle. Hermione nodded and found herself smiling as well. "We should go start the party," he said as he took her hand and walked her back towards the tables. "You'll dance with me tonight at least once, won't you?"

Hermione shrugged. "I'll think about it, though I'll tell you right now that I'm not much of a dancer."

"I noticed that on our wedding day," he muttered.

Hermione kicked him in the shin, almost tripping him. She smiled when he scowled in pain and the effort it took to not jump up and down on one foot while he rubbed the other. "That was because I was distraught and I had no desire to dance on the worst day of my life," she muttered.

Draco glared at her and let it go when she reminded him of "the day he had ruined her life." It didn't matter in the end. Her viciousness towards him had gone down a notch and that made him feel good about himself. That meant that he was doing something right and he supposed that it had something to do with him inviting Potter to the party. They walked over to the main table where his parents were already seated and he held out Hermione's chair for her to sit as well. He magnified his voice and welcomed everyone, giving a very short speech of appreciation to those who had helped him accomplish his dream and he gave an overview of the merchandise and special orders that would be available and the special discounts for children who would be a part of the Quidditch teams at Hogwarts.

Then dinner and drinks were served and the store and dance floor were opened for those who wanted to shop and have a good time. All in all, the grand opening was a success. The only downside that Hermione found was that McLaggen had been watching her the entire night. He was a creepy fellow, and she was even more shocked to see that Daphne Greengrass was sitting next to him, her arm around his. She had asked Draco and he had nodded and said that Cormac was her husband, that she had opted to keep using her own last name instead of his.

As Hermione made her way around the hall where there were many couples dancing slowly, she spotted Harry and waved him over towards the exit. He nodded and moved towards her, but before he arrived she was intercepted by a red-head as tall as herself. Her eyes were narrowed and shinning with blue fire, so very like Ron's eyes.

"We need to talk," she said, pulling her out the door. "And before Harry can hear what I have to

say."

"About what?" Hermione asked, not resisting her as they walked out into the cool breeze of the evening.

"I know what you did Hermione," said Ginny in a low voice.

"What did I do?" Hermione asked, her blood freezing in her veins at those words.

"Don't play dumb with me! I'm talking about what you did for my parents, how you saved the Burrow!" Ginny nearly yelled.

Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth, hoping no one had heard her. "What do you know?" she muttered. Only muffled sounds were her answer. Hermione removed her hand and Ginny scowled at her.

"I know that you married Malfoy to save the Burrow, and don't you dare deny it!" she hissed quietly.

The brunette stared at her with wide, fearful eyes and shook her head. "I didn't do anything of the sort. I'm happily married to him and it had nothing to do with the Burrow," she said, averting her eyes.

Ginny made a noise of disbelief. "I cornered my mother and she told me everything yesterday. I know about the mortgage and about the new owner not throwing them out. Then I found out that Malfoy blackmailed you into marrying him in order to not destroy my parents' home."

"Hey, what are you two talking about?" Harry asked as he came out behind them.

"You—" Hermione threatened with a closed fist, "—you told her everything when you promised me that you wouldn't say a thing!" she said angrily. "How could you, Harry?"

"What?" Harry asked. "I didn't tell Ginny anything!"

The red-head pointed at Hermione. "Ha! So it's true then? I knew that something had been off about the way you had broken up with Ron and then married Malfoy, but I had no idea it had been this!" said Ginny with a shake of her head.

"Hermione, I didn't tell her a thing!" Harry said, voice filled with truth.

"He's right, Hermione. He didn't tell me a thing when he should've," she said darkly.

"How did you find out then?" asked Hermione softly, all the indignation ebbing out of her and leaving her feeling heavy.

"I found out from you actually," Ginny said to Hermione. At the questioning look on both of their faces she explained. "I was coming back from Diagon Alley when I saw you run out of my mother's house in tears. Then I saw Harry follow you out and I climbed a tree to listen to you two. I heard you say what your reasons were, Hermione," she said quietly.

"Do you see that I never wanted to hurt your brother or any of you? Your father almost gave his

life for mine during the war and I knew that I would do anything to repay that debt. Besides, your parents made me feel as if I were part of the family as well, how could I let them be thrown out of a home that had been theirs for so many years?" Hermione asked, her eyes watering.

Ginny stared at her incredulously for a space of two heartbeats and then moved forward, taking Hermione by surprise when she hugged her. "I hate you Hermione," she said, voice choked with tears.

Hermione gave a laugh that was half sob and hugged her back tightly. "I missed you, even though we're so different in some things and so alike in others. I never wanted to hurt anyone, but this was the best way to do this. Harry has been a great friend by not saying anything, now I need you to promise me the same thing. If Malfoy finds out that two people know about this, he'll take it out on your family," she said.

Ginny didn't look convinced. "Hermione, we can find some way to get you out of this. Ron is miserable without you and I know you are too, but by the way I just saw you cozying up to Malfoy, I can't help but wonder if you've liked him to some degree all these years," she said almost absently.

"What?" Hermione snapped. "I don't like him!" she hissed. "Before he and I married, he made me promise that I would act the role of the perfect wife whenever we are in public or if there's media around. When we're at the Manor I throw shoes at him and physically assault him when he's at his worst," Hermione grumbled.

Harry snorted in laughter. "I believe that," he said.

Ginny grinned too. "Does he mistreat you?"

"No. He wants me to believe that he's serious about our marriage," Hermione admitted.

"Do you?" Harry asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Of course not, but he's doing his damndest to convince me."

"She doesn't want me to help her out of her marriage," Harry said to Ginny.

"Why?" she asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Please respect my wishes. I know what I'm doing concerning Malfoy. And to make sure that this doesn't spread, we're going to use charm of silence regarding this issue because so much has already been sacrificed. Agreed?" she asked expectantly.

"Fine," Ginny said in annoyance.

"Agreed," Harry said with a nod.

When they walked back into the hall, Hermione smiled at Ginny. "It's good to have you back as my friend. I've missed you."

"I missed you too, but since we can't say anything about the subject anymore, we need to tread carefully around Ron and my mother," Ginny said, squeezing her hand.

Hermione nodded but before she could reply she was swept away by her dear husband. "Where have you been?" he asked her.

"With Harry and Ginny," she said with a smile as he led her to the dance floor when a slow muggle song came on. She had to admit that she was in a good mood as Draco held her against him, and she felt none of the repulsion she had felt the day they had married. She didn't like him much still, but he was tolerable. "How do you like your party so far?" she asked him as he settled his cheek against her temple.

"I'm enjoying it immensely. The store has been a great success and I am almost certain that the other four will be the same," he said quietly. "And because I also get to have you in my arms if only for a few minutes."

Hermione just stayed quiet at his words. "Enjoy it while you can," she said softly.

"I will," he said. He rubbed his nose against her jaw, making her close her eyes as she breathed in his scent. Draco's eyes met Potter's from across the room. The other man looked disgusted at the display, but he turned to his own girlfriend and ignored him.

Then his silvery eyes met McLaggen's as he danced with his own wife. The other man was looking at Hermione with a smoldering gaze that made Draco want to punch him out. No one looked at his wife that way. No one.

There was a silent clash of wills and in Draco's eyes McLaggen could see the promise of pain if he ever laid a hand on Hermione. If he so much as looked at her that way again Draco would hurt him.

McLaggen looked away, a lazy yet arrogant smirk playing at his lips as his eyes darted to Hermione one last time. Malfoy didn't scare him, and Hermione was a special woman unlike any other he had ever met that he planned to have, one way or another.

Dun-dun-dun. The suspense is mounting and things are getting hot! I know that their argument wasn't explosive like many of you thought, but believe me, there are more to come that will be bad. I know that many of you are jumping with joy at the close updates, so I hope I made you happy!

So Harry and Ginny now know Hermione's secret but were sworn to secrecy, Draco is wining Hermione over one step at a time, and two other men want Hermione! What is this world coming to? McLaggen doesn't have good intentions, I can tell you that. So stay tuned and hopefully I can have another chapter out by next week.

Thanks everyone for the reviews on the past two chapters and I can't wait to see what you all thought about this one! For those of you who send me comments, I'm sorry that I don't reply, it's just that I'm really busy sometimes and I can't get to it. Just please don't think that I'm ignoring you or anything, I appreciate the concerns or the questions and will try to get to them as soon as I can.

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 6: Alcohol and Gryffindors Don't Mix

Warnings: Mentions of sex and some bad language!

Ginevra Weasley was used to getting her way. She was after all the baby and the only girl in a large family with many brothers. So when she tried to convince Hermione to tell everyone the truth about her marriage to Malfoy—even while she had been literally sworn to silence on said topic—and she didn't get her way, it made her very angry. Harry had laughed at her when she had thrown a temper tantrum, her face turning as red as her hair.

Now she was locked in a staring contest with her closest female friend. The brunette who now went by the name of Hermione Malfoy. Harry Potter was sitting between them, calmly flipping through the latest edition of "Quidditch Aficionado," and trying to tune out the growls coming from his girlfriend's throat.

"Can we order something now? I would really like to eat some food before our lunch hour is over," he said, not looking up.

"Not until Hermione let's us do something about her current problem," said Ginny.

"I told you two that I'm handling things, you don't have to worry about it. Besides, I'm a big girl and I know what I'm doing," Hermione said as she motioned the waiter over.

"I could choke you with my bare hands," said the red-head.

"You'd probably end up breaking a lot of nails in the process," Harry pointed out.

Hermione laughed. "Please, Gin, just let it go. I love that you're concerned about me, but I don't need your help. Please let it go?!" she exasperated.

Ginny sighed heavily. "What about Ron?"

"He's probably better off without me," said Hermione sadly.

"I can't believe this! I can't freakin' believe this!" Ginny exploded, catching the attention of many people around the restaurant they were sitting in. It was a small muggle place where they served the best Beef ravioli and Chicken Alfredo Hermione had ever tasted.

"What don't you believe?" Hermione asked.

"The fact that you're giving up so quickly on the love you said you felt for Ron! He's miserable Hermione, and Lavender is not helping him. She fawns on him like a house elf and it makes me sick to see them that way," Ginny said with a sneer.

"He's not going to wait two years for me. Look at him; he's dating someone else even though

you say that he's unhappy. He'll find someone who will make him truly happy. But if he doesn't and if he's still waiting for me at the end of these two years, that'll mean that we are meant to be," Hermione said as waiter came over and took their orders.

Ginny finally stopped trying to convince Hermione and sulked unhappily in her chair. Harry leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Do you want us to tell the waiter that it's your birthday today? I bet they'll sing you the muggle birthday song," he said in a baby voice.

Hermione chortled and tried to cover it up with a cough when Ginny turned the glare from Harry to her. She was happy that she had her two closest friends back, even though she missed Ron so very much. "Hey Gin, I want to gather a small group of us girls so that we can go out to celebrate my birthday together. Want to come with?" she asked.

"Who else is going?" Ginny asked.

"Padma and Parvati Patil, Susan Bones, and I believe Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bullstrode will be there as well," said Hermione.

"Parkinson and Bullstrode?" Ginny asked skeptically.

Hermione nodded. "They're nice people once you get to know them. They're not the way they were before the war, when we were in school," she said.

Ginny still didn't look convinced, but it was Hermione's twenty-second birthday, how was she to say no? "Fine, I'll go," she said with a huff. "But if either of those two call me names, somebody is going to leave hexed with some Bat Bogeys," she said.

Hermione and Harry laughed at her words and the brunette nodded. This was looking up to be a better birthday than she had previously thought.

After a particularly difficult day involving over-bred Nifflers that had been kept in inhumane conditions, Hermione arrived at the Manor and wanted nothing but to sit down with a good book and some tea before night would come and she would go out with her friends. She was just happy she had decided to go to work today, otherwise she would've missed the tip off about the Nifflers and she wouldn't have been able to participate in their rescue.

She and Neville alone had healed as many as forty-five creatures each, and there had been many more. The man who had kept them in that condition was now in custody and had been using them to find gold in abandoned mines. But it seemed to Hermione that she wouldn't have some peace for a while when Narcissa stopped her and led her to the study.

"I'm so disappointed that you didn't allow me the chance to plan you a birthday party," Narcissa told her, serving her a cup of hot tea.

Hermione smiled apologetically. "You and Draco know well how I dislike parties. Besides, I'm going out with some friends tonight," she said.

Narcissa smiled at her enthusiasm. "Will you at least have dinner with us before you go out?"

"Of course," said Hermione. "But it will have to be a little earlier than normal."

"That's fine," the blonde said. "Now, I need you to help me plan a surprise birthday party."

"For who?"

"For Draco."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think so. I'm sorry Narcissa, but I'm not a party planner and your son and I are still not on good terms. We're not a real couple so we don't do what a real couple would do for each other," she said plainly, not wanting to disrespect the older woman.

"Come now, Hermione. You're going to leave all of those arduous details to me? I need your help," she said with a smile as she walked over to the bookcase behind the desk, pulling out a photo album. "This is the book I had you pick up with Draco. I sent the company the images and the dates and they made it for me. Now take a look at my family," she said softly.

Hermione stood and walked over to stand next to Narcissa as she opened the album. The outside had been made of rich emerald green velvet and inside the many pages held moving photos and next to them in gold script were the dates the photos had been taken. Around the photos, vine-like designs had been painted with the same gold to form beautiful borders around every single one.

"This is when I first found out that I was having Draco," Narcissa said fondly, showing her a picture of herself smiling, glowing really, as she patted her flat stomach. Even then Narcissa had been a very beautiful woman. Age had not diminished her beauty. Narcissa pointed to one image where there was a baby in a beautiful white outfit that looked pretty expensive. He looked to be about a month old and he was sleeping. He was a beautiful baby. "This is Draco when he turned one month old. He barely had any hair and because of the color of it he sometimes looked hairless," she said with a small laugh. The next one showed a toddler in a funny little outfit, holding a toy broom and jumping up and down. "Here he was one and the broom was a birthday gift from Lucius," said Narcissa.

Hermione smiled and looked at each picture closely. Every picture she saw of Draco was spaced a year apart. His second, third, fourth birthday and so on. As he grew, the innocent smile seemed to diminish; that sweet smile was then replaced by that infamous smirk starting from his twelfth birthday. The adorable boy had grown into a handsome man. Hermione wasn't blind, she knew that he was a very sought after man, not only for his looks but because he was filthy rich. She hadn't cared much for money, mainly because she hadn't had too much of it while growing up. She'd had enough, but she had never worried about what she would wear, or where they lived. Those just weren't things that mattered to her. The only things that had been running through her head during her teenage years had been getting perfect marks in every subject and trying to keep her crush on Ron a secret.

"I know that things between you and Draco are not normal right now, but Hermione I would really like to have grandchildren some time soon," Narcissa said casually.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Draco and I are not a stable marriage. We don't love each other and I doubt that we'll be even friends through this whole ordeal. We aren't fit to be parents right now or ever," she replied. "Besides, a child links two people forever and though I know that you are his mother, I don't want to be tied to Draco for the rest of my life."

Narcissa understood to a certain degree that Hermione didn't want to have Draco's children, but she was confident that her son would be able to win the girl over and they would make her a grandmother some time soon. She just hoped that Draco was smart enough to know how to make her love him.

Hermione watched Narcissa as the woman smiled wistfully as she gazed at the image of her son on his twenty-first birthday. She felt guilty for what she had just said to her about not having Draco's children.

"You know, Lucius and I didn't love each other when we married."

"Really?" Hermione asked in curiosity. "Were you forced into the marriage too?"

Narcissa nodded. "We had an arranged marriage between our families. I was eighteen and Lucius was twenty-one. It was my duty with my family to marry a pureblood and to push the Black's name higher in the Wizarding world. I didn't love him, but he was good to me, so in time I developed feelings for him," she said with a smile.

"But at the time you didn't want to marry him, did you? Didn't you feel as if the world would collapse over you if you married a man you didn't even like?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, I liked him," Narcissa said with a smirk. "He was and still is a very attractive man."

Hermione laughed softly. "So you had a crush on him?"

The older woman nodded. "I did, and it was a tad embarrassing because he knew. A man can always tell when a woman is attracted to him. But enough of Lucius and me," she said. "Will you help me after all with the party-planning?" Narcissa asked with a raised brow.

Hermione just huffed a breath and nodded reluctantly. "You're lucky I like you," she said with a smile.

Narcissa laughed softly and nodded. "I am," she said before showing Hermione what she had already started planning.

"You brought us to a bar filled with handsome men to celebrate my birthday or to get us drunk and cheat on our other halves?" Hermione asked Pansy as they walked into the most trendy and hard to get into bar in Wizarding London.

"A little of both," Pansy said smugly, very much aware that almost every male eyes had become glued to them as they walked into the exclusive bar. A waiter appeared at their side and walked them towards the VIP section, where they had their own bar and barman, and had them sit around an oval shaped table in cushioned seats.

"What will you beautiful ladies be having this fine night?" the young man asked.

Pansy winked at him and smiled. "I'll have a Screwdriver, and you can start off my friend here with a T-N-T," she said motioning to Hermione, who didn't look too convinced about a drink with that name.

"Black Russian," said Ginny.

"Hurricane," Padma put in.

"Soul Kiss," Millicent said after a moment.

Parvati smiled. "I'll have a White Russian."

"I'll have Vodka on the Rocks." Susan finally decided.

"And bring us a bottle of your best champagne as well. We're celebrating Hermione's birthday," Pansy said.

The man's eyes widened as he looked at Hermione closely as if finally recognizing her for who she was. "It's an honor to meet a woman like yourself, Mrs. Malfoy," the waiter said. "If it didn't go against the rules of the bar, I would ask you for an autograph. My brothers and I are big admirers of yours."

"Thank you," Hermione said, smiling uncomfortably.

"Did I hear Hermione Granger is celebrating a birthday today? In that case, all the drinks are on the house," said a new voice. All the women turned to see Cormac McLaggen standing behind the young man, a smooth smile on his lips. "Go get the ladies their drinks," he said crisply. The man nodded and almost ran off to get the orders.

"You own this place?" Hermione asked.

He shook his head. "My lovely wife does, but guess who pays for everything?" he asked with a chuckle.

Ginny noticed the tight smile on Hermione's face and decided to do something to get rid of the arrogance-in-human-form standing before them. "We don't want to seem ungrateful, but this is a girls night out," she said with meaning, earning a grateful look from Hermione and an impressed grin from Pansy. No woman usually brushed off Cormac McLaggen that way.

"I perfectly understand ladies. But if you need anything, anything at all, just let me know," Cormac said. They all nodded and he walked away with a swagger.

"Merlin, did you see the way he was looking at you Hermione?" Parvati asked.

The brunette looked disgusted. "Why don't we go somewhere else? I don't fancy the idea of getting pissed drunk with that creep lurking around," said Hermione.

"Nonsense," said Pansy. "Drinks are free and this is one of the best bars around here. It's the best place to be seen."

"Why do we want to get seen if we're drunk and making fools of ourselves?" asked Ginny.

"Good point," Pansy replied, but then the drinks and two bottles of champagne arrived along with glass flutes. She then looked at Hermione, who just shrugged as if saying that she wouldn't mind having a drink. "Let's toast," the ex-Slytherin said as she poured a glass for each of her

companions. "To the birthday-girl!" she said, raising her glass.

"To the birthday-girl!" The rest of the women echoed and clanked glasses.

Hermione smiled and took a sip of the champagne, remembering the first time she had tasted it at the victory party that had been held for Harry after the war had been over. It was still a little bitter for her taste, but the hot sensation of it going down her throat wasn't all that bad. When they finished with their glasses of bubbly, they began with their different drinks. Hermione had to admit that Pansy was as funny as she was clever. She had some very interesting stories regarding past encounters with different men and she wasn't ashamed to tell them about it.

"I have to say that the most disappointing of my trysts would have to be..... Zacharias Smith," she said, making a face.

Parvati nearly choked on her drink. "Tell me about it! If a man won't do to you what he wants you to do for him, dump the sod," she said with a slight slur.

All the women burst out laughing; they had progressed to doing shots of tequila as they recounted a horrible date or a horrible shag. So far, the only ones who would not mention a shag had been Hermione, Ginny, and Susan. But they did have plenty of dates gone wrong. "You've taken a turn with McLaggen, haven't you?" Padma asked Pansy.

The dark haired woman made a face again. "Once; before he was married. He was good, but he's got a big mouth on him. He bragged about it, especially of his prowess in bed on how I 'carried on' when he had me. He's a complete asshole, so after the first time I just moved on to something better."

"To who?" Ginny asked as she poured another round of shots.

Pansy smiled drunkenly. "Blaise Zabini."

"Tell us!" Parvati exclaimed.

"Now there, ladies, you have a true gentleman. He was attentive and very generous. I lost count of how many times I ca—"

"Too much information!" Ginny said loudly before they all started to laugh again.

"All I'm saying is that which ever girl can catch that man, she'll be a very fortunate woman," Pansy said before taking a shot.

Hermione completely agreed with her, for about ten seconds. It was all due to the fact that her brain was being engulfed in a drunken haze as she took a shot from Ginny and downed it. Then she felt the need to use the ladies room. "I have to excuse myself for a moment," she said with a slight slur, standing and nearly tilting sideways.

"You want me to go with you?" Ginny asked.

"No, thanks. I can do it myself," Hermione replied before slowly zigzagging her way to the restroom. She had a bit of trouble keeping her balance once inside of the stall, but she managed to get the job done and to keep from giggling even as she washed her hands and

looked at herself in the mirror. Had she not been so tipsy, she would've been able to appreciate the beauty of the design around her. The style was of some Grecian God's palace, but Hermione hardly saw it.

She did see a man standing behind her though. She drew breath to scream, but he covered her mouth with his big hand. "Hello, Hermione," said Cormac. "I was wondering when I would be able to get you all alone."

Hermione struggled in his grip, but her movements were jerky and half-hearted due to the level of alcohol in her system. He slowly removed his hand from her mouth and turned her around in his arms. "I've wanted you for too damned long," he muttered before trying to kiss her.

"Stop!" She tried to yell against his lips. When he didn't, she parted her lips only to close them around his, biting with all her might.

Cormac drew back with a hiss and tore his lip painfully when she didn't release him. "You little bitch!" he snarled, slamming her into the wall. "You might not believe it, but violence can be a turn on for me sometimes," he said before pressing himself against her.

She struggled to get free and was able to grasp some of her combat training before she lost it. She slammed the palm of her hand up against his nose with as much force as she could muster. Then she put her weight into her shoulder and slammed herself against his ribs, knocking them both to the floor. "I'm a married woman, you sick bastard, and I would never be with anyone like you. Stay away from me!" she half slurred before walking out of the restroom. "Sick perve," she muttered before she was out the door.

The only reason he didn't go after her was that she had knocked all the breath out of his lungs and his nose was actively bleeding. His violent little Gryffindor. She had no idea how much he wanted her, but she would pay for what she had just done to him.

When Hermione arrived back at the table, she decided to keep to herself what had just happened. She needed another drink. "Are you alright?" Ginny asked above the music that hadn't been playing so loud before Hermione had left.

"I'm fine, but next time I go to the restroom, you have to go with me," Hermione said as she took the shot offered and tried to join in on the differences between Viktor Krum and Marcus Flint. A bizarre combination indeed.

It was by far one of the best birthday's Hermione had ever celebrated among friends. The girls didn't give her gifts at the moment, but they told her that the gifts had been delivered to her home where she would be able to open them on her own time.

By the time Hermione got home, which had happened after Harry arrived for Ginny and her, it was almost two in the morning. Harry had wanted to walk her to her room, but he hadn't been able to do so with a giggling Ginny in his arms as both Hermione and the red-head sang, "It's My Party."

Hermione stumbled twice on the stairs, even when she had taken off her two-inch heeled boots. Now she was trying to find her way to her room, but she felt like Alice in Wonderland. The doors looked too small for her to fit through. As she walked slowly down the hall, she nearly broke an

expensive looking vase that happened to get in her way. She caught it just in time and giggled as she placed it back on the pedestal it had been on.

She then proceeded to open a random door and spotted a bed. At this point it didn't matter which bed she dropped on. Her vision was spinning and her dress was a bit itchy. She wasn't even aware that there was already someone in that bedroom.

Draco watched her quietly as she tilted sideways as she tried to get to the zipper of her little black dress. She looked tasty. Her hair was falling out of the stylish bun it had been in and she wasn't wearing any shoes. She was also singing and quite off key.

"It's my party and I'll cry if I want to

Cry if I want to, cry if I want to

You would cry too if it happened to you

Judy and Johnny just walked through the door

Like a queen with her king

Oh what a birthday surprise

Judy's wearing his ring."

Draco smirked when she tried to sit on the bed and fell off, but he took pity on her. She was getting aggravated. "Need some help with that?" he asked, chuckling when jumped at his voice.

Hermione squinted at him and then smiled. "Help me off the ground would you?" she asked, giving him her hand. He pulled her up effortlessly and pressed her against his body. She giggled again and wrapped her arms around his neck to keep her balance as her vision spun again. "You smell nice," she said, nuzzling his neck.

"You smell nice too," he whispered against her corner of her mouth. "Like cherry blossoms and tequila," he said with another deep chuckle.

She grinned and began to sing again as she swayed in his arms.

"It's my party and I'll cry if I want to

Cry if I want to, cry if I want to

You would cry too if it happened to you."

Then she did something that shocked him to the core. She kissed him. But it wasn't just any kiss. She was all energy and force, jumping onto him and forcing Draco to grip her bottom in order to keep them in balance. He tasted the alcohol in her breath and knew that she was beyond drunk.

He toppled them onto his bed and kissed her, his body betraying his mind as he pulled down the strap of her dress and kissed and bit at her shoulder. Hermione gasped against his shoulder,

sliding her bare legs against his hips. His hands were on her thighs and bum, rubbing and groping and driving Hermione crazy. His lips felt so good on her body and he smelled nice. All man. She giggled and sang another verse of the song before he kissed her again. She was so bloody tired.

"Hermione," he murmured.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Hermione had never seen such beautiful eyes before. She smiled. "Hmm, what?" she asked tiredly. "Why did you stop? That felt good."

"I know," Draco admitted. "But you're drunk."

"No I'm not," she said with a smile. The next thing they both knew, she had passed out.

Draco chuckled softly and looked at her as she slept. She was a real beauty completely disheveled and with a half-unzipped dress. It was a good thing that she had passed out, otherwise his body would have been too far gone to stop. She would be in enough mortification when she woke-up in a few hours in his bed. He grabbed his wand from the nightstand and transfigured her dress into an oversized t-shirt with a Slytherin crest across the chest. He smiled; she'd have a heart attack when she saw it.

Draco groaned and decided that after that little episode with her, he needed a cold shower.

Hermione awoke to a rhythmic pounding in her head and to a mouth that felt as dry as cotton. She was just thankful that everything was dark around her, but she had no real idea as to what time it was. Merlin the great, she had only experienced a hangover twice before, but this was by far the worst one. She shifted in her bed and froze when she felt an arm tighten around her waist. That was when she noticed that there was a warm body behind her, his breath on her neck. How had she not noticed it before? Oh, right, the headache.

As she slowly turned to look at him, a scream rose to her throat. She scrambled off the bed and fell on her bum when the sheets tangled around her legs. "Son of a bitch!" she yelled in pain before catching herself. "What the hell are you doing in my room?"

Draco winced at her volume. "Excuse me? This so happens to be my room," he said smartly. "You slept in here after coming home completely drunk and throwing yourself on me."

Hermione moved to her knees and stared at him. "What?!" she asked, the blood draining from her face. The pounding in her head was intensifying and she needed a special potion to make it all go away. Unfortunately, her actions with Malfoy would not go away with a potion.

"You snogged me good on my own bed," he said with a smirk. "Yes, you started it this time."

"And what else happened?" she squeaked.

Draco looked at her as much as he could through the darkness. "Nothing. You passed out before we could do anything serious," he replied.

Hermione let out a big sigh of relief and stood, noticing her state of dress and what was on the shirt. "Did you change me into this? Did you take advantage of me?" she almost yelled.

"No, I transfigured your dress into the shirt because I thought it would be more comfortable; don't you think?" he asked her innocently.

She gave him a suspicious look and nodded reluctantly. "Thank you for not taking advantage of me," she muttered.

"I tried very hard not to, even though you were basically begging for it," he said smugly.

Hermione gagged. "I wasn't begging for it! Not as far as I can remember!"

"How much do you remember?" he asked with interest.

Hermione thought about it. All she remembered was taking shots with the girls, McLaggen manhandling her in the bathroom, Harry dropping her off with a giggling Ginny in his arms, and warm hands and lips on her body as everything spun around her. Shite. She would have to do something about McLaggen. He was becoming a nuisance. She noticed Draco was looking at her expectantly. "I don't remember much after I arrived here."

"You were singing, 'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to,' and I must tell you that it was very amusing," he said with a teasing lilt in his tone.

She was beyond mortified now. She didn't have a singing voice! "Oh god," she gasped, sitting down on the bed. The headache was unbearable now. Then she started to laugh. "It was the best birthday I had ever had," she admitted as she lay down as far away from Draco as she could. "I need a potion for this hang-over," she muttered.

"You aren't angry?" Draco asked as he stretched slowly.

"No. I was drunk and it was my birthday. It was my birthday and I sing if I want to," she said with a small laugh. "I need to take something for my headache and then take a shower. I must look a right mess," she said before standing up slowly.

"You look beautiful at all times," he said as she walked towards the door.

Hermione turned to mock-glare at him. "Don't patronize me so early in the morning and after a night of drinking," she said with a smile before she walked out of his room.

Draco smirked to himself. A few weeks she would've knocked him out for keeping her in his room and holding her the way he had when she had woken up. This was a big improvement and he was well on his way to getting her to like him. Things were looking up for him.

"Wow, everything looks amazing here," Hermione commented as she and Blaise walked through Draco's store before it was opened to the public. She had asked Draco to see it before it opened so that she could find something to give to Harry when his birthday came around.

She's liked the gifts she had gotten though. Draco had given her a bloody house in Rome. He had told her that even if they didn't stay together when the two years were over, the house would be hers. Pansy had given her lingerie to wear for Draco, and Ginny had bought her a new edition of *Hogwarts: A History*. Padma had bought her a beautiful, red jewelry chest, and Parvati

had bought her a strange looking purse of the highest quality and brand name. Lucius and Narcissa had given her a piece of land, which Hermione had immediately starting thinking about using for her trauma center, and her mother had given her a beautiful scarf and hat set made of a really soft material.

"I know," Blaise said as he stopped to look at a model of how the Nimbus brooms had progressed from an old tree branch to the Nimbus 5000. There were also models for the Cleansweep, and the Firebolt.

"I think I'm going to get Harry some custom made Quidditch robes for his birthday," Hermione said as she looked through a booklet with samples of the textures, colors, and quality. The better the quality, the more expensive they were. There was also a section where the robes were reinforced to sustain damage and lowering the probability of getting hurt during a game.

"So," Blaise said casually. "How are things with you and Draco?"

"Why do you ask?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"No reason," he said. "It's just that you two seem like the perfect couple all the time."

"We're too perfect," Hermione said in understanding. "Well, we're not. Sometimes when we're at home he aggravates me so much at times, but he's not so bad. I've grown to like him a bit," she said with a laugh, remembering the way he had continuously teased her the day after her birthday. Aggravating little roach, she thought with a smirk.

Blaise echoed her as he looked over the various snitches embedded in a wall of velvet lest she see the look in his eyes. He had been rather hoping that she and Malfoy weren't such a perfect couple to the point where she needed consolation. But it appeared that he had been fooling himself. If she wasn't in love with Malfoy, why would such an amazing person like Hermione marry a man like Draco.

"What about you? Isn't there a girl holding your attention?" she asked him with a grin.

"Not right now, no. But I would like to start a family some time soon, so I guess I have to start looking, don't I?" He asked softly.

Hermione nodded. "Do you want me to set up with a friend of mine?"

"Knowing you, they're all Gryffindors," he said with a laugh. "No thank you."

"What's so wrong with Gryffindors?" Hermione asked as she hit his arm playfully. "You can go out with Padma Patil, Susan Bones—she was in Hufflepuff—"

"No thank you," Blaise interrupted. "Though I have nothing against your friends, I don't need you to set me up with any of your girl friends. I'm still enjoying being free," he said with a smirk.

Hermione smiled and walked towards the brooms as well. Just as she rounded a rack of robes, she almost tripped on a box that was sitting there on the ground. She picked it up and was putting it onto the counter when she noticed something odd. The package was addressed to her. "There's a package here for me," Hermione said as she turned it over to see if there was a name from the sender.

"Why would it arrive here?" Blaise asked as he came up behind her.

Hermione shrugged. "Draco would've given it to me at home and in my hands."

Blaise frowned. "Maybe it's a late birthday present from a friend?"

"Maybe," Hermione agreed. "Let's find out," she said before using her wand to open the top of the package. There was a card sitting on top that said, "Open Me." She did and read the inside. There was a riddle, asking her what would happen if she mixed two types of highly dangerous potions ingredients.

"I don't get it. What is this?" Blaise asked.

Hermione frowned and remembered something Snape had told them years ago about the two ingredients. "If these two ingredients are mixed together, they cause an explosion. They become a bomb," she said before looking inside of the box. The ingredients inside had been charmed to mix as soon as the box was opened and the card removed from the top. Hermione saw what it was and had time to yell one word to Blaise. "Run!"

Then the box ignited in flames, engulfing the store and blowing through the ceiling. The deafening explosion was heard from blocks away.

Disclaimer: I don't own the song by Lesley Gore, "It's My Party." I'm making absolutely no money off of it either.

SORRY! But I had to end it there. It serves my purposes for the next chapter. So, did you guys like? Who do you think would've sent that package to Hermione? Well, I'm not telling, so you'll have to wait for a little while more. I want to thank everyone who reviewed in the last chapter and I can't wait to see what you thought about this one. I got my drinks for the girls from Mixed-drink dot com, so if you guys want to see what they were made of, go ahead and check it the website. It's pretty small but it serves its purposes. Have a great weekend everyone!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 7: Saying Goodbye

You're not the person that you used to be

The One I want who wanted me

And that's a shame

"Sir! Mr. Malfoy, sir!"

Draco looked up at his secretary when she literally ran into his office in hysterics. "Calm down Gwen. What is wrong with you?" he asked calmly and a little miffed at having been interrupted while he read over the first sales of the store in Diagon Alley. He hated when he was abruptly interrupted that way.

She tried to draw a breath and ended up coughing. "Sir, we just got news from the shop located in Diagon Alley. There's been an accident!" she said after taking a deep breath.

"What kind of accident?" he asked, standing.

"There was an explosion inside the store. The merchandise was protected against fires, but I believe that the building was not. The walls and ceiling crumbled down!" Gwen said, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Draco felt his blood run cold when he remembered that Hermione had asked him to see the store before it was opened to the public. "Was there anyone inside?" he asked calmly. No use panicking before he had all the facts.

"I don't know sir! That was all that I was told," his secretary replied.

Draco was on his feet and grabbing his coat before he was out the door. Merlin, please let her be all right, he thought as he made it to the apparating section of his offices and left.

Blaise groaned in pain as he tried to rise from the smoking rubble. He hadn't even been aware that it was going to rain today. There were droplets splashing his face as he moved lethargically, his limbs barely cooperating with him. He felt someone take his arm and help him out of the rubble. "What happened?" he asked the stranger who was dressed in Healer robes.

"I'm healer Bines. The building exploded and the ceiling caved in. Can you tell me if there was anyone else in the building with you?" the man asked.

Blaise tried to clear his head a bit to think, but it was proving to be a hard feat. He blinked and almost swayed, feeling something wet trail down the side of his face. He touched his head and it came back with blood. Then he remembered. "Hermione. Hermione Malfoy was here with me!" he yelled, looking around at what was left of the store. There was only one wall standing out of the whole structure, but miraculously, all the merchandise was still new, as if it were protected by some shield. Merlin the great, she had to be somewhere under the rubble of the ceiling.

"We'll find her. You need to get some medical treatment," Healer Bines told him.

Blaise shook his head and pain lanced through his brain. "I can't. Not until you find her and I know that she's all right!" he nearly yelled. Then he heard it. It was a faint sound; a groan from nearby. He was walking towards it before any of the healers and search-and-rescue Wizards could stop him. There was a large piece of the wall tumbled over her, but he could see her hand. "She's right here!" he screamed.

The Wizards followed him and made quick work of the wall. "She's still alive," Healer Bines said as he examined her.

Blaise almost cried in relief. His heart had been in his throat as he looked at her, thinking the worse by the way she looked. Her face was bloodied and bruised and streaked with dirt that was washing away with the water falling over them, but she was alive. "How bad is the damage?" he asked urgently.

"We need to take her to St. Mungos to determine that," the healer said. "But she may have a concussion or internal bleeding so we need to take her now and you need to get seen too," he said as he and another healer levitated her onto a stretcher and then joint apparated away. Before the Healers took him as well, Blaise saw Draco approach but before he could say anything to him, they were already at St. Mungos.

"Where is my wife?" Draco asked as he entered the main lobby of St. Mungos. He hadn't cared much about his shop; all he wanted to know was if Hermione was okay and if he would be allowed to see her.

"Your wife's name?" asked the Welcome Witch in charge of the information desk.

"Hermione Malfoy, she was brought in just a few minutes ago," Draco said.

"Yes. She is on the third floor," the woman said with a polite smile.

Draco just nodded and ran for the lifts without a word. There was no time for pleasantries when he didn't even know how his wife was doing. When he arrived on the third floor, he nearly ran down the hall towards the next desk where the Medi-witches were sitting. "Hermione Malfoy. Where is she?" he asked the first woman he saw.

"You are her husband, yes?" asked the Medi-witch.

Draco nodded. "Is she okay? Can I see her?" he asked.

"Let me go get Healer Bines so that he can speak to you about your wife's condition," she said, standing off and going off to get the Healer.

Draco ran a hand through his hair in aggravation. Why couldn't they just tell him where Hermione was and let him see her? An unpleasant thought entered his mind as he waited. What if she wasn't okay? What if she was permanently damaged or maybe even dead—his thoughts stopped when the Healer approached him and smiled politely. If he had bad news, he wouldn't be smiling. Right? Right?

"Mr. Malfoy," he said, extending his hand.

Draco gave him an impatient look but shook his hand nonetheless. "I need to know if she's okay. That's all that matters," he muttered as they began to walk down the hall.

"She's out of danger. When she was found, she had a concussion and three broken ribs. One of her wrists was also broken and there were scrapes, bruises, and a few burns. Apparently the explosion was caused by a mixture of two highly incompatible potions. Mr. Zabini told us that it arrived in the form of a package, delivered to her name. When she opened it, the potions were charmed to mix and that is what caused the explosion. Your wife and Mr. Zabini had time to get

out of the way just barely before everything ignited. Unfortunately, the ceiling caved in and that was what caused their injuries. Still, we will need for her to file a report with the Ministry regarding what happened. There needs to be an investigation on who would have wanted to hurt your wife."

Draco nodded and felt his blood begin to simmer in anger as he thought of who would possibly want to hurt Hermione. Weasley was too goody-goody for something like this. Zabini had been with her and he wouldn't have risked his own life to hurt her. Brown was a cat-fight type of woman. There was no one else he could think of.

"We've managed to heal the concussion and broken ribs, but she needs to stay here a few days as a precaution and for her to get proper rest. She's on a sedative charm right now but I know that you want to see her. She should be awake in an hour or two," Healer Bines said as he came to a room and opened the door to the room Hermione was in.

Draco walked in slowly, not really knowing what to expect. When he saw her, his heart gave a violent twist in his chest. He tried to reign in his anger; there would be time for contemplating revenge on whoever had hurt her later on. Right now was not the time. She was sleeping, pale faced and bruised almost everywhere he could see. She had a brace on her right wrist, and her left elbow was bandaged. There was also a scabbing wound on her neck, but she was okay.

"Hermione?" he murmured, lacing his fingers through hers as gently as he could. Her arms and hands were bruised and scratched as well. He brought her hand up to his lips and kissed it gently. "I swear on all that is sacred and valuable to me, I will find who did this to you and make them pay," he murmured against her skin. He then leaned forward and placed another kiss on her forehead. "You really have no idea how much you mean to me, you stubborn Gryffindor."

Unbeknownst to Draco, Hermione had just heard the words he had said to her. The sedative she was under was pretty heavy, but she had managed to get roused by the sound of Draco's voice. The touch of emotion in his voice made something inside her shift when concerning their situation. If he had felt something so deep for her, why hadn't he just approached her the way a normal person would've? That was the only thing she could ponder before she was fast asleep again.

"When is she going to wake up? You said that she would be up and about an hour or two after we spoke yesterday and it's been almost an entire day. What's wrong with her? Is there something you're not telling me?" Draco ranted at the Healer and Medi-witch in charge of Hermione.

"I assure you Mr. Malfoy that your wife is out of any danger whatsoever. We just felt that she needed more rest. After she awoke in the middle of the night, we placed her under the sedative again. The more rest she gets, the better and faster she recovers from all this," Healer Bines said, motioning towards the bed where a very bleary witch was waking up.

"Why wasn't I made aware that she had woken up?" Draco asked darkly.

"You were sleeping comfortably on the couch, Mr. Malfoy. We felt that it wasn't necessary to wake you when she was asleep again five minutes later," replied Bines before moving towards his patient. Thankfully her husband stayed out of the way as he examined her injuries and asked her about her head-ache and her vision.

He then walked out with the Medi-witch and left them alone. Hermione smiled slightly and sat up, watching as he moved forward quickly to help her. "You should stay in bed," he told her.

"I'm fine," she replied. "I just have a small head-ache and I'm feeling slightly nauseous, but I'm hungry."

"Do you remember what happened?" Draco asked her seriously.

Hermione nodded, but then her eyes were wide. "How is Blaise? Is he okay?" she asked in anguish. "The explosion threw me back before the ceiling came down on us, but I don't know how he came out of this!"

Draco felt that anger burning again at her clear distress over Zabini's health. Would she ever react that way if he was in danger instead of Zabini? "He's fine," Draco snapped, keeping her sitting firmly on the bed when she attempted to rise. "He had a dislocated shoulder and some other wounds, but he was discharged yesterday evening."

Hermione seemed to relax greatly at the news, but then she noticed the look on Draco's face. "Did you stay here all night?" she asked, trying to change the subject and noticing that his clothes looked rumpled. This was the first time she had seen him look anything but impeccable. It was good to know that he was human after all.

He nodded and ran a hand through his baby-fine hair. "I needed to know that you were okay," he said softly, moving back and letting her stand this time. "Besides, I had to keep Potter out of here. He came by yesterday morning after he heard of the accident. He was acting like your mother," said Draco snidely.

"You didn't let him in?" she asked angrily.

Draco shook his head. "Your Healer wasn't letting anyone in that wasn't family. Don't look so angry. You can see him when you get out," he said with a small shrug. "Him and Zabini," he said softly.

Hermione swallowed hard. The fact that he was conceding to her seeing Blaise was big on his part. Especially after they'd had that argument a few weeks back about her not seeing her friend. She slowly walked towards her private bathroom and re-emerged a few minutes later, rubbing her bandaged elbow. "Thank you," she said, stepping over to him and looking deep into those pale eyes of his. She might as well act like an adult when he was doing the same about her friendship to his best friend.

He searched her gentle eyes. "For what?"

"For being so concerned about me," she said with a small smile.

"That's a given. You're my wife and I care about you, even though you hate me. I've said it many times but you just don't believe me," he said, smoothing her unruly hair away from her face. Apparently she had forgotten to brush the wild strands while in the bathroom. The curls were standing up at unusual places. She looked oddly endearing that way.

"When are they going to let me out? I want to get back to work tomorrow. Otherwise I'll fall

behind and I'll miss any type of field related work," she said, trying to avoid his gaze.

He stopped her by grasping her chin and turning her to look at him fully. She was blinking rapidly, trying to look anywhere but at him. He smirked before speaking. "I'm glad that you're okay," he said quietly. "If something had happened to you, I don't know what I would've done."

Hermione found that she couldn't help the blush that grazed her cheeks at his words, but she felt the deep honesty in them and found that she couldn't pull away. Didn't want to pull away. She knew what was going to happen, even before he started inching his lips towards hers, but she was stupefied on the spot. She couldn't think, couldn't argue with herself that she should stop what he was about to do. Why, oh why was he such a good kisser? And why did he have to have such soft lips?

He was already kissing her on that last thought, but she found that she wasn't even aware. Her good hand was gripping the material of his shirt tightly, while the other was resting on his chest. The brace had been a precaution while the bone continued to heal itself, but that didn't matter now. All that mattered was that she wasn't mad about Malfoy kissing her.

He kissed her until they came up for breath, both breathing ragged and staring at each other. Draco leaned forward and for a minute Hermione thought that he would kiss her again, but then he touched their foreheads and held her in his arms, taking in her flushed face and hazy eyes. This was the way things were supposed to be.

They were so caught up in each other that they didn't see the person at the door—who had walked in on the kiss—leave with a dejected sigh.

St. Mungos released Hermione the next day, after much arguing and whining on her part and eye-rolling on Draco's part. The major injuries were healed, but she still had some scabbing wounds, bruises, and minor aches. And to her chagrin, Healer Bines had ordered her to get another day of rest before going back to work.

As soon as Hermione and Draco stepped out of the Floo, they were greeted by Narcissa and Lucius. Hermione smiled and found herself being engulfed in a hug by Draco's mother. Her shock was so big that she barely reacted at all. Both Lucius and Draco were looking on with wide eyes at the scene. Narcissa had never hugged anyone but them.

"We're so glad that you're okay," Narcissa said, pulling back and petting down Hermione's still unruly hair. While at the hospital, she hadn't really had time to get some of that gel her hair dresser had been making for her.

Hermione grinned. "Thank you. I'm happy that they let me out early. I don't think Draco could've taken anymore whining on my part," she said in amusement.

"It's good to see you are safe," Lucius said in that drawling tone of his.

The brunette nodded politely. "Thank you," she said again.

Draco took her elbow and looked at his parents. "I need to get her to her room. The Healer ordered another day of rest before she goes back to work, so unless she wants to miss even more days, she will follow directions." He watched her eyes narrow with a barely restrained

smirk but she allowed him to apparate her straight to her room.

"Stop treating me like a little child. I'm feeling perfectly fine and I don't need another day of rest," she said in annoyance, sitting on her bed and rubbing the wrist that had been broken just two days ago. "How is your shop, by the way?"

He shrugged elegantly. "The merchandise was untouched, but unfortunately for me, the building was not. It is being rebuilt as we speak with the same charms of protection that my merchandise has. Luckily everything, including the building, is insured. The store should reopen tomorrow."

"Has the Ministry found out anything?" Hermione asked him.

Draco scowled and shook his head. "The package was completely incinerated so there was no chance of detecting any residual magic from the person who sent it. They're trying to track down all of the packages that were delivered that day."

Hermione pursed her lips and ran her hands through her tangled hair. She'd contemplated Cormac McLaggen as the person who had sent that package to her, but she highly doubted that he would be petty enough to want to hurt her after she had smacked him up a bit. Other than him, there was no one that came to mind.

"You'll have lunch with me today?" Draco asked as he looked out of her window. Her room had a very nice view of the gardens that stretched on and on in the back of the Manor.

"Aren't you going to go to work?" Hermione asked as she walked into her closet to find a pair of her jeans and a long sweater shirt for the cool weather.

"Not today. I decided to stay and watch over you. I need to make sure that you're following the Healer's directions," he said, looking at the pictures above her bureau. There was one of her with Potter and Weasel; one of her and her parents; one of her with Potter and the she-Weasley; and the last was a school picture of the entire graduating class of Hogwarts. He found himself on the top row and smirked as the Draco in the picture rolled his eyes and said something to Pansy, who was right next to him, making her cover her mouth and giggle.

Hermione came back out in her favorite clothes and tied her hair up into a bun. "I don't need a guardian," she said flatly. "But I am hungry."

"Good," he said, taking her hand and walking her towards the door. "We can have lunch in the gardens. I hope you're in the mood for Thai food."

She looked at their linked hands and wondered why she hadn't torn her hand from his already. Why was she feeling so strange all of a sudden? Could it be that... no, that wasn't possible. Did she have a... a crush on Malfoy? Did she fancy him? She certainly hoped she didn't, because liking a man who had blackmailed you into marriage wasn't something she wanted to do. She couldn't let him win.

As she eyed him closely, she noted the peaceful look on his face as they walked. He was a very handsome man. A bit paler than her, but the color suited his hair and eyes. He was taller than her and had a slim body, lightly built. Though she was still angry at the fact that he had made her miserable when they had married, he wasn't that bad a person. All she wanted now was for the rest of the two years to be over so that she could leave and maybe be with Ron again.

Though she knew deep in her heart that Ron would never forgive her for what she had done to him. Nothing would ever be the same.

Draco watched her quietly at the breakfast table, pretending to read the newspaper. The accident had happened a few days ago and since then, she had been acting a bit peculiar. She had been much nicer towards him and they had shared many more civil and interesting conversations, even after the media had started to speculate about her being alone with Blaise inside of the store before opening hours. Thankfully the media had placated when Draco had given them an interview about what he would do when he found the person responsible for putting his wife in danger and for destroying his store.

He and Hermione were sitting in comfortable silence in the absence of Lucius and Narcissa. His parents were out of town on a small vacation in their villa located in Madrid. They would be back in about three weeks. As he turned the page towards the society pages, he caught sight of an announcement that gave him a pleasant feeling of surprise and delight. His eyes were wide as he read on. Apparently he hadn't been subtle enough, for Hermione had noticed the look on his face as he read it.

"What's wrong?" she asked, setting down her orange juice. "What are you reading?"

"Just some drops in the stocks," he lied.

"You're lying," Hermione said flatly.

"How in the world do you know if I'm lying or not?" Draco snapped, setting down the paper.

She smirked. "Either you've lost your touch, or you just can't lie when you're around me," Hermione replied, sounding smug. "I know you're lying because you tap your fingers on whatever surface is near. Most of the time you do it on your leg so no one notices it much. But I do."

Draco scowled but said nothing. It unnerved him that she was able to know his mannerisms so well after living in the same place for just a few months. She took the opportunity to Accio the newspaper away from him. He watched her in silence as she flipped through the pages and wondered how she would take the news. This would only serve to make her angrier towards him, so he waited patiently for the screams and curses to come. He watched her as her eyes became misty with tears when she found the article and read it.

"Hermione?" Draco asked.

"Don't say anything," she murmured, setting down the paper before standing and walking away.

Draco sat there and waited for a moment. He was torn between giving her some space and going after her. He understood what she was going through to a certain degree, but he was also glad that she was finally seeing that the weasel was not right for her. After giving her a few minutes, he could finally wait no more and stood, walking towards the study to grab an envelope before walking up towards her room.

He knocked before going in and found her standing by her open window; the one that looked over the gardens. He walked over to her and leaned against the wall next to the window,

avoiding any contact with her and giving her the space she needed. "What are you thinking?" he asked softly, noting that her nose was red.

Hermione shook her head and swiped at the tears that began to trail down her face. "I don't know. I guess on some level I always thought that Ron would wait for me. Love me for the rest of our lives."

He narrowed his eyes at her words. "Did he ever tell you that he would love you until the day he died?"

Hermione's eyes narrowed in return. "I can't act as if it doesn't hurt," she said sharply, ignoring his question.

"Yes, you can," Draco replied slowly. "You can show him that you don't need him. That this isn't hurting you the way it is."

"And how am I going to pretend that the fact that Ron is now engaged to Lavender Brown doesn't matter to me?" asked Hermione. "That it doesn't break my heart?"

"This arrived yesterday for us. I think he wants you to be there," Draco said as he handed over an invitation.

Hermione took it out of the envelope and read the personalized invitation addressed to Draco and Hermione Malfoy. They were being invited to Ron Weasley and Lavender Brown's engagement party. "I don't want to go," she said, shoving the envelope and invitation at Draco.

"We have to. Otherwise the Weasel will win and you'll be branded a coward. Besides, if you don't go, the media will start rumors and speculate about your break-up with him. Do you want to be in the eye of the media again?"

"Your mother tells me that as Malfoy's, we are always in the eye of the media. So what does it matter?" she asked snidely. But then she wanted to see Ron for one last time before he married someone else. "Fine. We'll go to the party. But you have to promise that if I want to leave, we will leave."

"Sure," said Draco with a careless shrug. "It's customary to give them a gift, isn't it?" he asked her. She nodded once. "What should we give them? A new flat?"

Hermione scoffed. "Now that's just plain rude. Ron wouldn't take it. Especially coming from you."

"A paid honeymoon trip?"

She wanted to slap Draco for mentioning a honeymoon between Ron and Lavender. She shook her head. "Just give them a bloody toaster."

"A what?"

"A—never mind. I don't care. Just give them something that isn't insulting or ugly," said Hermione.

Draco nodded and ran a hand over her cheek. "Be ready before eight." He turned her to face

him and took her hand in his. "I know you'll be able to show them—especially Brown—that you are a much better and stronger person than her. One of the things that I like about you is your courage," he admitted.

"Something I lacked when it came to defending my love and relationship with Ron. I guess we really weren't meant to be," she said softly. "I need to be alone for a while," she said with meaning.

He nodded and left without another word.

"We're late," snapped Hermione as she and Draco walked towards the restaurant where the engagement party would be held.

"We're fashionably late. And you said to get them a gift; it took me a little longer than I had originally thought," Draco said in annoyance. "You look lovely, by the way."

Hermione smiled slightly. "Thank you." She smoothed a hand over flared, red skirt and sighed. She was also wearing a tight black turtle-neck and knee-high, black velvet boots. Her hair was loose and it trailed down her slim back in long, silky curls. Draco noted smugly that on the outside of the shirt she was wearing the pendant he had given her.

As they entered the fancy restaurant and then the private hall for the party, they were asked for their invitation before their coats were taken and they were led to the table where the guests were taking their seats. Hermione spotted the entire Weasley family, Harry, Neville, and a few other friends. Lavender was walking around, talking to the guests and showing off the ring to her girlfriends.

Ron was standing with his father, Bill, and Charlie. His eyes met Hermione's and they stared at each other for a few seconds before she looked away and smiled at something Draco whispered into her ear. She didn't miss the angry look on Ron's face. Harry approached them and gave Draco a loathing look before hugging Hermione. "I told Ron that you and I are speaking again, but as you know, he's a tad angry at me," whispered Harry.

Hermione pursed her lips. "Is he happy, Harry?" Hermione murmured so that only Harry heard the question.

"I don't know," he admitted. "All I know is that I can't convince him to not do this. Come on, you can sit with me and Gin."

They followed Harry but were intercepted by Lavender. "What are you doing here?" she hissed.

"We were invited," Hermione said with a sneer worthy of her husband's.

"I don't remember inviting you. I don't want you here. Not after what you did to Ron," Lavender spat, trying not to draw any attention to them.

Ginny approached them, eyes narrowed and lips pursed. "Back off, Lavender. My brother invited them to the party. I know because I was there when he sent the owl."

Lavender didn't like it one bit, but she knew better than to argue with her fiancé's sister. "You

better keep away from him if you know what's good for you," she snapped.

Draco scoffed and gave her a cool look. "You know what? I think she'll manage," he said, voice filled with sarcasm. He eyed Hermione and noticed her cheeks were flushed in anger as they watched the other woman walk away.

Harry and Ginny looked at her too with slight frowns on their faces. Then Ginny spoke. "Come on, Hermione. We need to sit down because the party is about to start."

For Hermione, sitting through it all and watching Ron talk about how he had proposed to another woman was sheer torture. He looked happy and she couldn't help but feel slightly betrayed that he hadn't waited for her. After all, they had been engaged only a few months ago, but she supposed that their break-up had made him hate her and had forced him into the arms of someone else. She couldn't stand the sight of Lavender. Merlin, how she hated that woman, and it wasn't because she was with Ron now. There was just something about her that threw her off.

The night began to drag on longer than she had expected, and she couldn't take anymore of watching Ron hug and kiss Lavender. She turned to Draco, who was looking bored and down his nose at all of her childhood friends and fellow Gryffindors. "I want to leave. This whole party is getting on my nerves," she said quietly.

Draco cocked his head to the side and gave her a long look. "You're letting him—them—win?" he asked, nodding his head towards Ron and Lavender.

"Yes."

"Don't," he said simply, standing and taking her hand. He nearly dragged her to the dance floor where a slow song had begun to play. "Just one dance and then we'll leave this wretched party," said Draco, pulling her tightly to him and wrapping his arms around her waist.

Hermione pressed her forehead against his shoulder. "I didn't think it would be this hard," she admitted, swaying slowly with the music. "Seeing him with someone else."

Draco nodded and felt compelled to show her something, even though it could harm his chances to convince her that the Weasel was wrong for her. "Watch him," he murmured against her ear. Hermione was about to ask why when she felt Draco's lips against her neck, on a spot that made her breath shudder and her eyes flutter closed. "Look at him," he repeated against her jaw.

Hermione swallowed hard and forced her eyes to where Ron was. He was looking at her and Draco with so much anger and..... jealousy in his face it made something in her chest twist painfully. She pulled away from Draco when she saw Ron storm out of the hall towards the exit. "I'm going to use the ladies room and then to say goodbye to Harry and Ginny," she said before walking away from him.

Draco watched her go and knew without a doubt that she would go in search of Weasley. He would let her because what she needed now was closure and the Weasel was sore enough right now to give it to her. So he sat down with a glass of wine and waited. He wasn't a very patient man; he would give her a few minutes before searching for her.

Hermione had managed to give everyone the slip and was now looking for Ron in the back of the restaurant. When she had no luck, she walked back into the building and noticed that the door to one of the empty private halls was ajar. She walked in slowly and looked around. There was only minimum light inside, coming from the lights in the hallway.

"Didn't expect you to come looking for me," said a voice from behind her.

Hermione jumped and placed a hand over her thumping heart. "I just thought that we needed to talk."

"About what?" he asked in a dry voice.

"About everything. Ron, though you may not believe me, I am sorry about the way I ended things with you," she said, voice cracking. "I never wanted to hurt you."

"But you did," Ron said as he stepped away from the shadows and the wall he had been leaning on. "You did and to this day, I don't think that I will ever be able to love anyone the way that I loved you."

Loved. Hermione felt a few tears trail down her face. "Does that mean that you love Lavender?"

"If I didn't, why would I marry her? Why did you marry Malfoy? I saw the way you kissed him that day in your hospital room. I guess I wanted to believe that you had married him for his money. But what I saw that day made me see that I was wrong," he said, looking away from her tears. "All I know is that what we had is done. It's over and I need to move on. I've grown from that hotheaded child I was until a few months ago, and I guess that I have you to thank. Hate is poisonous and though I tried hating you, I couldn't. All that's left in me is forgiveness," Ron said softly, his own eyes shedding a few tears.

Hermione let out a shuddery breath. "You forgive me?" she asked softly.

Ron nodded and moved to stand in front of her. He then placed a gentle kiss on her forehead and touched her cheek. "Though it's going to take me some time to get used to the idea of you with Malfoy and me with Lavender, I'll do it. Lavender is good to me and I feel that in time I will love her," he said, running a hand through his red hair. He had grown it since she had last seen him.

"I hope you're happy, Ron. I really do," she said, touching his cheek.

"I can forgive you, but I will never forget. But for now, just know that I don't hate you. Take care of yourself, Mione," he said before walking away and leaving her there alone in the dark.

She let the tears come then, before she went back to the party to see Draco again. When the shudders receded, she used her wand to fix her make-up and to remove the redness before walking back to the party. Draco walked over to her with their coats and helped her into hers. He gave her a questioning look but didn't ask when she shook her head. She said goodbye to Harry and Ginny and to their friends before making for the door.

Just as they reached the threshold, she turned and found Ron watching her. His eyes were different now; more at peace than the past times they had seen each other. He had said

goodbye to her and the love that they had once shared. That she still felt burning in her chest.

In her mind, she said goodbye to him too. Maybe for good.

Was that sad enough for you guys? I know that you're all expecting more Draco/Hermione action, but we're getting there, just don't get impatient. Next up is Blaise and more of our favorite couple as they become closer.

I just want to thank everyone who reviewed the last chapter. It's amazing to know how many like my work. Thank you again and I will hopefully have another chapter ready next week!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 8: So Sick

Warning: This chapter includes an adult scene towards the end!

There's only so many tears that you can cry

Before it drains the light right from your eyes

He watched her as she walked through the garden with his mother, a small smile on her face. He had noticed that for the last few months, the light in her eyes had been fading. Draco had to wonder what the Weasel had said to her at his party, because since then he had seen resignation in her eyes. Though she had resigned herself to their marriage, that didn't mean that she was making things easier on him.

Though they shared many meals together, and he took her out on dates, it was like he was spending time with an acquaintance rather than an actual date. There were also many mornings when she awoke with red eyes, proving to Draco that she still cried over the past that would no longer be a part of her life.

Potter had come by a few times and every time gave him a look of pure, unadulterated loathing, that Draco had to wonder if he knew something was twisted about his marriage to Hermione, or he suspected something. Draco's eyes followed Hermione as she and his mother stopped to look at a rather large bloom amongst the peach colored roses.

As the wind blew through her wavy hair, Draco was mesmerized when a gloved hand moved up to push her hair out of her face. She really was a beautiful woman. Beautiful and all, he was getting tired of her indifference. He was tired of hearing her crying when he passed by her room. He was tired of living in a fake marriage that he had brought on himself. He wanted her to see that he was serious about having a relationship.

Narcissa left her outside alone and he watched Hermione as she sniffled, dabbing at the corner

of her eyes before she too walked back into the Manor. His heart did a funny little thing in his chest at the sight of her crying. I guess I'm not so heartless after all,' Draco mused to himself. Or maybe he was, because he was getting angry at the thought of her crying over Weasley.

After thirty minutes of wondering if she was being melodramatic, he left the paperwork he had brought home from work and stormed up the stairs and to Hermione's room. He knocked the door sharply, waiting impatiently for her to open it or to give him a sign that he could go in.

She opened the door herself and watched as his eyes narrowed at the sight of her. Though she had tried to fix her face—in vain—her eyes and nose were still very red. "Crying again?" he asked with a barely refrained sneer.

"What's it to you?" she asked, voice choked with emotion.

"I can't believe this," he spat, stepping into her room and slamming the door shut.

Hermione's eyes narrowed at the glint in his eyes. Usually that glint was followed by an argument between them. After nearly a whole year of living with the man, she had come to know what ticked him off, how he looked before he would start teasing her, or before they were about to have an explosive argument, or when he was about to compliment her on something. "What?" she asked slowly.

"It's been months since Weasel and Brown announced their engagement and they are getting married in two weeks. Get over it!" he nearly yelled at her. "I'm sick and tired of seeing you crying, or seeing you red faced after you've been crying!" he exploded, making her jump slightly.

At his words, her eyes watered, but she would be damned if she cried in front of him ever again. "You asshole!" she screamed at him. "That is not why I'm crying! If you would just take your nose out of your own arse for more than a second, you would know why I'm like this. I cannot believe that you would yell at me for crying!"

"Why else would you be crying if it wasn't for the fact that Weasley picked to marry someone else and not wait for you?" asked Draco, a full-fledged sneer on his face.

Hermione let out a slow breath, and her eyes flashed dangerously. "You've just proved to me that you're just as stupid and self-centered as you were in school. You wouldn't know anything about compassion if it came and bit you in the arse. Get out of my room. Now."

"Fine," Draco snapped, running a twitching hand through his hair. "Cry yourself to old age, foolish Gryffindor. Get over the fact that that idiot preferred someone other than you! If you would just take your nose out of your arse, you would see that there are other men in the world who would give anything to be with you!"

"Get out!" she screamed, kicking off one of her shoes so that she could throw it at him.

He stormed out of her room just as the shoe sailed over his head. "You throw like a girl!" he yelled at her.

"That's because I am a girl!" she yelled back before slamming the door to her room closed.

Draco was fuming as he stomped down the main staircase, but the look on his face did nothing

to deter his mother when she approached him from the sitting room.

"Were you arguing with Hermione again, dear?" she asked, refraining from rolling her eyes. His cheeks were flushed with a pale pink, and his hands were in fists as he paced back and forth in front of her.

"Mother, not now, please," he said, breath huffing out in anger.

"Be nice to her, Draco."

"Why should I?" he asked petulantly.

Narcissa shook her head at him. "Because tomorrow is the anniversary of her father's death. She's been in tears all day because of that," she said gently.

Draco's breath left his lungs in a long huff as he realized what he had just done. "Kill me, mother. I'm a complete idiot."

Narcissa smiled sympathetically. "I can't do that. Who would be the heir to the fortune then?" she asked as she patted him on the back. "Sweetheart, if you want Hermione to see you, really see you, you have to start treating her better. She's a sensitive woman who needs a man who can be patient and sensitive with her. If you keep treating her this way, she will never allow you to get close to her."

Before Draco could reply, Hermione came storming down the stairs, face set in a frown that softened when she looked at his mother. "Narcissa, I am going to see a friend; I will be back later," she said before going to the floo room, and not even sparing a glance towards her husband.

"You better pray that the friend she is going to see is not Blaise Zabini. Now he is a sweet, sensitive boy," Narcissa said before walking off towards her sitting room where she had been knitting. She had just finished a little outfit that she hoped Draco and Hermione's child would wear in the near future. She knew that her son was a good, sensitive boy. A bit foolish and hardheaded, but thankfully, she had taught him never give up. If he truly loved that girl, he wouldn't stop until she loved him back.

Narcissa smiled, picturing children with blond curls and brown eyes.

Hermione sniffled as she pulled her short, black gloves on and reached for her long, matching overcoat. She had gone to see Harry and Ginny last night. It had taken a lot of whining, but she had convinced them to not be there at the service with her. Though she would've loved to have them there, they would've made her cry with their comfort and words, and she needed to be strong for her mother. If she cried, then her mother would too, and Hermione didn't want that.

She needed to be strong, so for the past two hours, she had cried all that she could muster as she waited for sunrise. Then she had showered, dressed in all black, and was now ready to go to her father's last resting place. She smiled slightly as she looked at herself in a full length mirror. Thanks to Narcissa, she was dressed stylishly in black, and she wore her hair in a side-ways tail, in big curls and tied with a black ribbon.

As she pulled the door open, a heavy breath left her when she came face to face with the last person she needed to see today. "What do you want? I'm on my way out," she said tersely.

"I—I would like to accompany you today," he said courteously.

Hermione gave him a suspicious look. "Why?"

"Because I am your husband," was his obvious reply. "And because I was an idiot for what I said to you yesterday. I'm sorry," he said clearly.

Hermione stared at him. "This is going to be a muggle ceremony. My muggle family on my father's side will be there. They will want to speak to you and shake hands with you. You'll go through all that without making scathing remarks or without making faces?"

He smirked roguishly at her. "Even I know when to refrain from doing two of my favorite pastimes. Scathing remarks and making faces," he said with an amused tone of voice. "I will endure it all for you."

"Okay," she conceded. "But you have to promise that you won't blackmail me, or tease me about anything. Not today and specially not in front of my mother. Agreed?"

"Agreed," he replied.

"We will floo to my mother's house and from there we will take a car to the cemetery. A muggle care," she emphasized.

"Fine," he said simply, walking her out of the door and towards the floo room.

Hermione's step faltered as she gazed at him. She wondered how much effort it had taken him to not mouth off about muggles and automobiles. He sure was acting strange today, and she wondered what he was trying to get out of the situation. Her mother was waiting for them by the door and the drive was a quiet one. Draco stood by her and held her free hand as her other arm wrapped around her sobbing mother.

He had to admit that he was a bit surprised at her strength because not once did she show a sign that she would cry. Though the sadness rose off of her in waves, she was the picture of courage and strength, even as some curls came undone and waved in her face with the wind.

The ceremony was a nice one, even though he understood little of the things that had to do with what muggles called, 'religion.' When it was all over, Hermione moved away to hug and speak to her aunts. Draco discovered that she had two uncles on her father's side, and two aunts. She also had many girl cousins her age and younger who were all looking at him as if he were the most attractive thing they had ever laid eyes on. At Hermione's annoyed look, he smirked and flashed her a wink before she huffed and turned back to her family. Her uncles had come over to shake his hand and to ask him if he was treating Hermione right, that she was their pride and joy. All he had said was that she was his pride and joy as well and that he was trying to be a good husband to her.

"You can cry now, your mother is gone," Draco said as he watched her staring at the marble tombstone with her father's name and date of birth to date of death on it.

Hermione gave him a forced smile. "It was hard. I tried my best to be strong for her, but inside I was a mess," she admitted as she turned to see her mother getting into her car with her sister-in-laws. Hermione had convinced her that she and Draco would find their way home.

"She saw right through your hard face, you know. A mother always does know her children," Draco said as he wrapped an arm around her slim shoulders and pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

"Thank you for being here," she muttered as he drew her into his arms and hugged her.

Draco felt relief wash over him when she took the comfort he was offering. "Do you forgive me then? For what I said to you yesterday?"

Hermione nodded against his chest. "Yes. I guess it's a bit of my fault for not telling you of this day. But still, you shouldn't assume things that can make an ass out of you," she said quietly, trying to ignore the fact that he had pulled the ribbon out of her hair and was running his fingers through the strands.

Draco chuckled lightly. "I want to take you on a trip out of the country," he said.

Hermione pulled back from his embrace and shook her head. "I can't right now. I have some really important research that I can't postpone," she said, drying the tears on her face with the handkerchief he offered.

"Well, lucky for you, I want our trip to be on our anniversary. So you have two weeks to tell your boss that you need five to seven days of vacation. Unless... you want me to talk to him about it," he said slyly.

She gave him an annoyed look. "No, I'll tell him myself. Where are we going by the way?"

"Venice, Italy."

"Ooh, I heard that they have a renowned museum of history there!" Hermione said with a smile.

Draco rolled his eyes and lifted her chin so that she could look him in the eyes. "I want things to change between us," he said quietly. "Here, in front of your father, I would like to ask you to give me a chance to make things work out with you."

She stared into his eyes and flinched slightly as the silky strands of his hair tickled her cheekbones. "You and I will never work things out unless you show me that you will be a man that I want to be with."

"Tell me what to do and I will do it," he murmured, inching his face towards hers.

She gave him a very faint smile. "I can't do that. You have to figure it out on your own," she said before their lips met in a gentle kiss.

Draco cupped her face in his hands and kissed her slowly, feeling her hair tickling his face with the wind, feeling his heart swell when she responded and didn't pull away. When they finally moved away for breath, he stuffed her ribbon into his pocket for safekeeping. He would find a way to make things right, even if it meant giving her her freedom back.

Hermione watched Draco as he signed the papers at the check-in desk of their five star hotel. He had a very nice signature; a very neat cursive with a large M and a curling y. The woman behind the desk was eyeing him with interest until she caught the look on Hermione's face and cleared her throat before organizing the papers on her desk.

"I hope you enjoy your stay, Mr. and Mrs. Malfoy. Your room is on the last floor and it is the presidential suite. Have a good evening," she said in a very clear tone, even with her accent.

"Thank you," said Draco as he took the keys and guided Hermione towards the lifts.

"Are all Italian women so—so—" she was at a loss for a word to use.

"What do you mean?" Draco asked her as he pushed the button for the top floor.

"Oh, please. Don't tell me you missed the way she was practically drooling over you," she said snidely. "Everyone noticed. Even the couple at the next desk."

Draco eyed her with that look that made her mouth run dry and smirked. "With you by my side, there's no reason for me to notice other women," he said seriously.

Hermione felt her stomach flutter at his words. Though she wasn't too convinced about really giving him a chance to woo her, she had to admit that she her resolve was breaking with his efforts. Ironically, Ron and Lavender had gotten married two days ago, and Hermione had to wonder whose idea it had been to make their marriage so close to her own with Draco. Before she had a chance to respond to Draco's words, the doors opened and she stepped out.

They found their room at the end of a short hallway where there was just one door across from it and Draco showed her in. Hermione had to stop and stare. This was a room? It looked more like a flat than a room. The colors were a mix of blues and greens that matched wonderfully with the mahogany furniture. There was a large sitting room with a TV in a closed cabinet, a dining section connected to a kitchen, and towards the sunken terrace, there was an indoor pool just the right size for two. She just wondered what the bedroom looked like and hoped fervently that there were two beds in there.

"Because of the time change, we will be going to dinner in an hour. So I suggest you get ready because I will be taking you to one of the best restaurants in the country," he said, noticing that their luggage had been set just inside the bedroom door.

Hermione nodded and took a few minutes to look around the suite before grabbing her clothes and magically fixing them into the proper places. She took a quick shower, thankful that the shower was in a separate section from the other fixtures, including the tub. She knew exactly what dress she should wear for dinner. Narcissa had insisted on helping her pack and Hermione now realized that it had been with an ulterior motive.

"Come on, Granger! If you take any longer I'll come in there and drag you out!" Draco called from the door.

"Keep your pants on! I'm on my way," Hermione said as she grabbed her purse and tried not trip in her haste to get to the door. She didn't miss the look on Draco's face when he saw her. Hmm, it seemed that he liked her dress.

Draco stared. There wasn't anything else he could do, short of making a fool out of himself. She was wearing a gown the color of red wine and made of a very fine silk. The halter-top tied at the back of her neck and the two strips of cloth trailed down her bare back. She was also showing a decent amount of cleavage and the style of her dress highlighted her slim waist before flaring out and down. Her hair was almost completely straight with the exception that it curled at the tips of every layer. The only jewelry she was wearing was the medallion he had given her, and a pair of tear-drop diamond earrings.

She looked at him with those brown eyes—that were almost toffee colored because of the make-up she had applied—and he was completely floored by her. "You look..... amazing," he murmured.

Hermione smiled and tried with all her might to not blush at the look in his eyes. She did her own inspection of him and found that he looked very handsome in the all-black suit he was wearing. He had cut back his hair again, but it looked much shorter than his last hair-cut. It wasn't really a wonder that women stopped to stare at him wherever he went.

"Thank you. If we're done staring at each other, can we go?" she asked with a nervous laugh.

Draco cleared his throat and helped her into her coat before pulling on his own and heading out the door. As they walked through the lobby, Draco noticed that almost every male eye turned to her and watched her as she walked next to him calmly. Hermione was none the wiser, as if she wasn't aware of the beauty radiating off of her. How could a woman not see that she was so amazing?

They walked a short distance to the restaurant and were greeted by the maître d', who took their coats with a smile.

"I have a reservation under Malfoy," Draco said.

"Right this way sir, ma'am," said the short man, bowing slightly before leading them to their table. He held out Hermione's chair for her to sit and then handed them their menus. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Yes, bring us a bottle of your best red wine," Draco said. They stayed in silence as they looked over the various meals, and Hermione was thankful that they were in English because she didn't know much Italian. When the waiter came over with their wine, he poured them a glass and took their orders.

"Do you come here often?" Hermione asked as she looked around at their private section of the restaurant.

He shook his head. "No, but they do know my father. I think that Lucius owns half of the restaurant by now," he said with a chuckle. He took a small sip of wine and sat back so that he could look at her. "I have a surprise gift for you."

Hermione raised her brows at him. "And what is it? I hope it's not jewelry, because I happen to

think that expensive jewelry is rather a rather monotonous gift."

"So giving you the medallion was dull?" he asked in amusement.

She shook her head. "No, I really liked the medallion. I wear diamonds and silver and gold because your mother has been drilling me to since before we got married. I just think that that kind of jewelry is pointless."

Draco nodded. "Then I should be relieved that I didn't buy jewelry. No, this is something else that I have for you."

"Was I supposed to get you something too?" she asked before taking a sip of wine and feeling the liquid smooth down her throat.

"No, but it would've been nice if you had," he replied.

Hermione fidgeted with her napkin and tried not to feel as if she were on her first date once again. She had to admit that things between her and Draco had changed since that day at her father's resting place. She couldn't ignore the look of longing in his eyes when he looked at her, and she knew that if he kept on being charming and suave, he would throw down the last of her resistance to see him as a partner and not as an enemy.

Dinner was set in front of them and afterwards, they sipped on their third glass of wine as the band began to play slow, classical music. They were away from prying eyes as Draco stood and offered her his hand. "Will you dance with me?" he asked slowly.

Hermione smiled and stood, feeling a bit tipsy as he took her in his arms and they moved slowly to the rhythm. "When are you going to give me my gift?" she asked as she placed her cheek against his shoulder and tried not to fall asleep in his arms. The wine had made her sleepy and heavy, but she was still conscious enough to know what they were talking about and where they were.

"I can't really show it to you now, but I can tell you what it is," he whispered against her temple, brushing back the hair that had fallen over her neck.

She moved back to look at him in curiosity now. "Well?"

Draco sighed and ran a hand through his baby-fine hair. "Remember that you told me that I had to find a way to make things right so that you could give me a chance?"

"Yes," Hermione said with a nod, feeling more sober with his words. "What did you do?"

He swallowed hard before taking her hands in his. "Yesterday, I met with the Weasley's."

"What?! Why?" she asked, not understanding what he was getting at. Why would he do such a thing?

"I asked to see them at my office, where my lawyer and a notary were present so that I..... so that I could give them back their property," he said seriously.

Hermione stared at him as if he had sprouted a second head. Her eyes were wide and

searching his desperately for some sign that he was joking or lying. But he wasn't. He had been fully aware of the fact that maybe he would lose her completely upon returning the property because he would lose the only leverage he had held to keep her married to him.

"You're serious?" she questioned.

"Completely."

Draco nearly started when she kissed him, her arms wrapping around his neck, but he slipped his around her waist and pressed her to him. Now that he felt the touch of her lips on his out of her own accord, he knew that he had done the right thing.

Hermione was acutely aware that the situation between her and Draco had changed as soon as they had entered the bedroom of their suite and he had kissed her again. She also noticed that there was just one bed, not that she was currently complaining. She had asked him for proof of what he had told her, and he had paid for their dinner and brought her back to the hotel suite to show her the paperwork. He had even told her to test it with her wand so that she could see that it was all authentic. He had then followed her into the bedroom.

His lips traveled down her neck to suck at a spot that made her arch into him, and she felt the last of her resistance finally melt away. Maybe it was the wine in her system, or the fact that he had given up his blackmailing that was pushing her to give into him. He stopped, breathing ragged, and pressed a kiss to her jaw.

"Are you sure about what you're doing? Once we start, there's no going back," he murmured.

Hermione's own breathing was coming in pants, and just the fact that he had stopped to ask her if she was sure about going all the way with him proved that he was really trying to win her over. "I'm sure," she said before kissing him again, deeper and more urgent.

He pulled away with a small pop. "Are you sure you're not drunk? That you won't regret this tomorrow?"

She huffed out an impatient breath. "I'll regret it if you keep trying to convince me not to do this," she snapped. "And no, I'm not drunk. I know perfectly well what I want and what I want you to do to me."

Draco smirked before running his hands down her sides and hitching up her dress so that he could touch her skin. Hermione gasped when he turned her around, so that her back pressed against his chest and his long fingers hooked into the sides of the lace panties she was wearing. "Have you done this before?" he whispered against her neck as he pushed them down.

She nodded almost reluctantly. "Once. Long ago."

"Just once?"

"Yes," she bit out in annoyance. "I was fifteen, and I swore I wouldn't do it again until I married."

"Why?" he asked as one hand trailed up the inside of her thigh.

"Because," she said breathlessly as she felt his hand caress over his goal. "It hurt and I didn't enjoy it."

"You'll enjoy it now," Draco whispered before his fingers moved against her slickly. Her breath came out in a small moan as he found that hidden place that made her hips jerk. With his other hand he undid the knot at her neck that held her dress in place and watched as the silk pooled at her hips, stopped completely by his busy hand.

Hermione gasped and dug her nails into the hand that was working her towards that peak she hadn't experienced her first time, and she heard Draco's breath come out shaky as she ground herself against him. She nearly doubled over when his hand stopped and drew away. He turned her around forcefully and watched her body as her dress fell and pooled around her feet.

"You're beautiful," he said before leaning in to kiss her with ferocity as his hands ran over her exposed body.

Her hands moved to his pants and she undid his belt and fly before slipping her hand inside. Draco jerked against her and groaned when her warm hand moved slowly against him. "Not today," he whispered, taking her hand out before undoing the buttons of his shirt and pulling off his clothes.

She ran her hands over his finely defined muscles before he wrapped his arms around her and laid her on the soft bed after he had shoved the sheets and covers away. "Ready?" he asked her, his breath hitching in anticipation.

Hermione nodded, her speech evading her as she felt his body slide against hers, and her mouth opened at the sensation of him inside of her. Her thoughts shattered as he moved slowly inwards. There was discomfort at first, just shy of pain, but he was slow and patient. Two qualities that she had never thought she would see in Draco Malfoy.

There was sweat on his brow with the effort it took to not move, trying to give her time to adjust. Hermione shifted and ran her hands up his back, feeling the burn and discomfort recede almost completely. "Draco?"

"Yes?" His voice was strained.

She brought him down for a kiss before sliding her legs over his hips. Draco groaned and began to move. The sensations were new to Hermione, and she felt like a virgin all over again, but in a very good way. Her breath came out with a long moan as his lips found her chest, even as his movements never faltered.

His eyes were half-lidded as he watched her move beneath him. Her mouth was open and her eyes were closed as her fingers slid up his shoulders and her nails dug into his skin. The feel of her was even better than he had ever dreamed, and she was finally his. It had taken them a year to get to this point, but this was worth the wait. Giving up his black-mailing schemes had proved to be the best decision he had ever made in his life.

Hermione cried out as she felt a different burn coming from where she and Draco were connected, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing her chest to his as she arched back and moaned his name in pleasure as she came undone. Draco held her with a hand around her waist and ground hard against her before his control snapped and he followed her

release with his own. He let her slide back onto the bed and pressed his forehead to hers as they tried to calm their breathing.

After a moment of peace and quiet, he moved off of her and to her side, watching as her face moved to his and she offered him a smile. "Are you regretting it?" she asked teasingly.

"Never," he replied before kissing her slowly, lazily.

"You better," she said before turning on her side and smiling when he spooned her. "Because I thought it over and I'm willing to give you that chance that you wanted to make me happy."

Draco kissed the side of her neck and gave her a squeeze. "That's good. I was getting sick of trying to convince you that I wanted to be with you."

Hermione laughed. "At least you weren't trying to convince me that you were a good guy," she muttered. Draco bit her shoulder and she slapped his arm with a laugh.

Things were good. For the moment. Hermione let out a sigh as she thought of what she would tell Harry and Ginny about this change in her situation. Harry would kill her if he found out that she didn't hate Draco the way she had before. But for now, she would enjoy the week she and her Slytherin would have away from the real world.

Hehehe. How did everyone like this chapter? I'm sorry it took a while to update, but I had some technical difficulties. I had almost finished writing this chap a few days ago, but the flash drive I had it in broke, so I had to start from scratch and what I remembered writing. Now, I know that many of you are probably rolling your eyes and calling me a dummy, but now I know that I need to save my work and back it up.

So, anyway, thanks for the great reviews I got last chapter and I hope this one was enough to satisfy those of you who were almost begging for more Draco/Hermione action. You got your action alright. I hope everyone has a great week!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 9: Bridge of Sighs

And I can't go on that way

As she sat with her legs curled up under her, warm in a fluffy robe after an early shower, the doubts she had pushed away the night before invaded Hermione's mind. Draco was still sleeping and she had been up and about for an hour now. He really was a handsome man; his hair was in complete disarray and he was wrapped up in the warm blankets, sleeping soundly.

She didn't love him, she knew that much, but she liked him and the fact that he had taken that leap and have given back the Weasley's property back to them proved that he wanted her to

see him in a serious way. Now he had no way of blackmailing her into submission. He had let of the control. As she sipped on the coffee she had made from the complementary packets in the kitchen, her mind wandered to Ron. He was a married man now.

She and Draco had gone to the wedding reception only and for a short period of time. She had only congratulated him and Lavender and had given them their gift. The pain she had felt then had been an almost palpable thing, but now it felt like a dull ache. Ron belonged to someone else, and now, so did she.

Maybe in the long run Draco would realize that they weren't good for each other, or maybe things would fall apart. She didn't know whether or not she would be able to ever love Draco. She liked him, yes, but there was a big gap between fancying someone and loving them. At least for her. There was an even bigger gap at the prospect of them having any children.

Hermione's eyes snapped to him when she heard a loud groan before he stretched his arms over his head. She smiled to herself and watched as his eyes opened and he blinked sleepily before feeling around the bed for her.

"You are the laziest man I have ever met," she said from the soft recliner she was sitting in.

Draco lifted his head and looked over at her, a smile curling at his lips. "What are you doing up so early?"

"Early? You call ten in the morning early?" she asked with a raised brow.

He shrugged and sat up, not bothering to cover his nakedness as he strolled into the restroom. Hermione watched him go with pink tinting her cheeks. When he came out, she stared at him and the flush returned full force when he caught her looking.

"Have you no shame?" she asked.

Draco stopped and looked thoughtful for a moment. "No," he said with a chuckle.

"Right," she said. "I forgot who I'm talking to." She felt a bit nervous under his gaze. What did she say to him after a passionate night that she was half-regretting? Well, it seemed he wasn't going to wait for her to say something.

He walked over to her and pulled her to her feet. "How about a good morning kiss?" he murmured against her cheek.

"I have coffee breath," she said, moving away.

Draco wasn't deterred. "I like coffee," he said before sliding his lips against hers. His hands were pulling at the knot of her robe and then gliding his hands over her skin.

Hermione felt her heart speed up and her eyes slide closed before Draco decided to start his morning with something other than coffee.

After spending the morning holed up in the hotel's bedroom, Draco took Hermione out to lunch at a deli that was nearby. It was an odd feeling, to sleep with a man that she didn't love. She felt

strange. Maybe drinking wine had been a bad idea last night. Alcohol did make her act unlike herself, no matter how little she consumed.

"There's something that I'm curious about," Draco said as they sat waiting for their food.

Hermione had a feeling she knew what it was. She gave him a shrewd look. "I don't think I want to talk about that with you," she said.

"Come on. You're my wife. I have a right to know who the first man in your bed was," he said in a low voice.

She took a sip of her juice and sat back to look at him. "Fine. I'll tell you because I'm in an agreeable mood." She rolled her eyes at the smugness plastered on his face. "I was fifteen and he invited me to visit him in Bulgaria," she said nonchalantly, not bothering to elaborate or give him anymore information. She was quite pleased at his reaction; his eyes narrowed and his mouth twisted in disgust.

"Krum? What self-respecting female would go for that numskull?"

Hermione felt like slapping him. "Are you forgetting that he was voted as one of the best Quidditch players ever for three years straight? He was also famous, but those reasons are not why I liked him. He was also a very sweet guy and I was star-struck. Besides, Ron was very jealous of him," she said with a fond laugh.

Draco glared at her and at the mention of Krum and Weasley in the same conversation. "You don't keep in touch with him, do you?"

Hermione smiled. "Why? Are you jealous?" she asked sweetly.

His gray eyes narrowed at her. "It all depends on your answer."

She shook her head. "No. I don't keep in touch with him. After that one initial night, we never spoke again. I think he was as embarrassed as me that our night was such a disaster. I believe he got married two years ago."

Draco regarded her calmly. "Why Krum? I always thought that you were a goody-goody who would wait for marriage or give it up to Weasley. Whichever came first," he said.

"Alcohol and I don't go hand in hand. I think that has become obvious by now. Viktor and I had too much to drink, and things progressed from there. We were clumsy and rough and it was an experience that I would like to forget," she said with a small shrug. "I guess that with Ron, we both wanted to wait until we got married to actually do something. Not a word," she warned when she saw the glint in his eyes and knew he would tease Ron because of the piece of information she had let slip. "What about you? Who was your first?"

"Why, you were of course," he said devilishly.

Hermione let out a laugh of delight. "That's what every girl wants to hear from her husband. But come now, let's not start lying so early in the day."

Draco took a sip of his bubbly beverage and gave her a bored look. "Contrary to popular belief,

Pansy was not the first girl I was with," he said evasively.

But that didn't mean that she hadn't been on the list. Hermione had to wonder how many had followed and her eyes narrowed when the little thought made something twist in her gut. "Tell me," she said.

"I don't think you will like to know who she was."

"Why not?" Hermione asked.

"Because, the last time you and she spoke, you and I had a big row."

She almost choked on the chip she had popped into her mouth as he spoke and slammed a hand on the table-top loud enough to draw the attention of some of the muggles nearby. "Do not tell me that you are talking about Daphne the Green-snake-in-the-grass!" she hissed.

Draco choked back a laugh but nodded. "I was fifteen as well, but I was most definitely not drunk," he said empathically. At the annoyed look on Hermione's face he reached over and took her hand, placing a kiss on her knuckles. "But that was ages ago and she means nothing now. Believe me."

Hermione stared into his pale eyes for a moment before looking away and drawing her hand from his grip slowly. Before she could even reply to his words, a woman stepped towards their table and Hermione couldn't believe her eyes. She had never thought that all that rot about conjuring a person just by saying their name was true, but at the moment none other than Daphne Greengrass was standing at their table, looking like the blonde bombshell that she was. Hermione just prayed fervently that McLaggen wasn't with her. And she had been having just a great day.

"Hello, Draco," Daphne purred, not even turning to look at Hermione in acknowledgement.

"Daphne," Draco said in greeting.

"I was hoping to find you today. Your mother absolutely refused to tell me where you had gone, but I had my ways of finding out. There are some things that I need to speak with you about. Business things," she said softly.

Draco looked at Hermione, who was currently sipping her drink and trying to ignore the other woman completely. He could tell that she was angry. "Daphne, in case you haven't noticed, I'm here with my wife. Where is that perfectly pedigreed girl I knew back in school? Have you forgotten your manners?" he asked snidely.

Daphne looked taken aback at his words. "You're right, where are my manners?" she asked as she turned to Hermione. "Hello, Hermione. How are you this fine afternoon?" she asked politely.

"I was doing pretty good," Hermione replied dryly.

Draco tried to hold in a chuckle as Daphne turned to him, her lips thin in her own anger. "Daphne, this is a trip for pleasure, anything about business will have to wait until next week when we get back to London," he said seriously.

"But this can't wait!" the blonde protested. "We need to talk. Alone. Maybe we can have dinner tonight?"

Hermione threw her napkin on the table and stood, scraping her chair as loud as she could. "If it's so urgent, talk now. Draco, I'll see you back at the hotel," she said before leaving him at the table with the other woman.

"Wait!" he called as he pulled out some money to pay the food with.

"Draco," Daphne purred as she touched his arm.

"Do you have short term memory loss? Why are you so hell bent on insulting my wife every minute she is in your presence?" he snapped. She was at a loss for words. "This business will wait until I get back home, until then, if we see each other again I do hope that you show my wife the same respect with which you want to be treated," he said before walking away from her.

Daphne just stared at him in stupefaction. Who did that man think he was treating her like that? She was Daphne Greengrass and her father was a man as recognized as Lucius Malfoy was in their society. She was young and beautiful and though she was married, any man would give up their entire fortune to be with her!

The fact that Draco Malfoy wasn't one of those men and he was putting some mudblood above her was a blow to her feminine pride. What did the ugly little Gryffindor have that she didn't? Daphne had seen the way Cormac looked at her as well, even though he treated her—his wife—like a queen and he gave her everything she asked for. What did men see in a plain, brown haired woman?

Hermione fumed silently as she walked through the buzzing streets of Venice. Due to the many islands and canals surrounding Venice, there were no vehicles at all. The people used the gondolas and ferries to get around, or they just resorted to walking. The streets were full of people selling this and that and trying to get her to buy some unnecessary knick-knacks. She stopped to look at a porcelain bird that she knew Narcissa would love to add to her collection of various precious creatures. As she moved into the store to negotiate the price, her arm was grabbed gently and she was a bit surprised that Draco had left his "friend" to come after her. Except that when she turned, it wasn't Draco who was holding her arm. Okay, her day was officially ruined.

"Cormac," she said, pulling her arm from his grip. "What are you doing here?"

He shrugged elegantly and smiled. "I'm here with Daphne. She insisted that she wanted to go on a vacation and there is rarely anything I deny her."

Hermione refrained from rolling her eyes. "Well, it was nice seeing you, but I have to go," she said, postponing her porcelain bird-shopping in order to get away from the man standing so close to her.

"Wait," he said, catching up to her outside. "What's the rush? I would really like it if you had lunch with me."

"I'm afraid I can't. Draco and I just had lunch before your wife so rudely interrupted. She was

hell-bent on getting him alone. So I left them alone," Hermione snapped, realizing that there was a note of jealousy in her voice.

Cormac scowled. "Daphne has always had a soft spot for your dear husband. Aren't you afraid that he'll slip and cheat on you?" he asked her bluntly.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "I'm positive," she snapped. "Though I can't say that your wife wants to be faithful to you if she's so insistent upon getting my husband alone."

"Why don't you and I forget about them for a while and go somewhere more private ourselves?" he asked her quietly. "I have a flat here that Daphne knows nothing about."

"I don't think so," Hermione replied stiffly. "I don't know what kind of woman you take me for, but I respect my marriage and my husband. The fact that you don't do the same for your wife speaks volumes of you, regardless of who she is. I would appreciate if you kept your distance from me, Cormac. I'm not interested in you or taking part in your hidden agenda," she said before turning and walking away.

"In case you didn't understand what she meant, she wants you to stay the fuck away from her," a dark voice said from behind him.

Cormac turned and his eyes narrowed at the blond man himself. "The fact that she's married to you means nothing to me. I'll have her one way or another," he said to Draco.

"You're welcome to try, but beware that I am a possessive man and if I even see you go near her again, I won't hesitate to hurt you," Draco said in a calm tone.

The taller man merely smiled. "You don't know what you're up against."

"Neither do you. I'm a Slytherin by nature and playing dirty isn't below me. You touch what is mine and you will find out who Draco Malfoy truly is."

"How very poetic of you," said Cormac. "I'll keep your words in mind, but know that I'm not afraid of you," he said before walking away.

Draco found her in the gardens of the hotel, sitting on a bench that was shaded by overgrown flowers and huge cherry blossom trees. She was reading a book and she looked relaxed. He had looked for her for about thirty minutes and had finally gotten word from one of the employees that they had spotted her in the gardens.

"Only you would be reading a book during your vacation in Venice," he said from behind her, leaning over to press a kiss to her neck.

Hermione just smiled and nodded. "It's an interesting book. Besides, reading relaxes me no matter how agitated I feel," she replied. "What did your dear friend Daphne want?" she asked nonchalantly.

He shrugged. "I blew her off and told her that if it was important, we would discuss it when we returned home. I had a few words with McLaggen once you left him there in the middle of the street."

Her eyes narrowed in remembrance. "You heard the things he said to me?"

Draco sat down next to her and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Most of them, yes. He is one cocky bastard," he commented.

Hermione smirked. They were more alike than he thought. "I have no interest in McLaggen. I told you that he creeps me out whenever he's in close proximity of me."

"Let's not talk about him now. How about we go sightseeing? There are some things that I want you to see," he said as he stood and offered her his hand.

"Okay," she said, taking his offered hand. "Just let me drop off my book and grab my camera and a jacket just in case," she said as they walked back into the hotel.

Afterwards, they had a very nice time as they explored the islands that comprised Venice. They visited the St. Mark's Basilica, one of the most famous churches because of its amazing architecture, and they finally took a gondola ride.

As they sat back in one of the newest and private gondolas, Draco wrapped his arm around her shoulders and watched her as she took in all the sights. He had noticed that her eyes always shined that way whenever she was learning new things or she saw something that fascinated her. He felt happier and more at ease than he had in a very long time. Just knowing that she no longer despised him the way she had a year ago was enough. The icing on the cake was that she was his now and he would do anything in his power to show her that their marriage was something he wanted.

"You see that bridge over there?" asked Draco as he pointed to a high bridge they were close to passing under.

"Yes. What about it?" she asked. She watched the setting sun shine over his pale hair, making it look like a halo around him. She rolled her eyes in amusement, this man was hardly an angel.

"That is the Bridge of Sighs, and there's a legend that goes along with it."

Hermione smiled. "Really? And what is that legend?"

Draco wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her towards him. "The legend says that if two lovers kiss on a gondola at sunset and under the bridge, they will be assured eternal love," he said simply.

She smirked as he pushed her by the back of the neck towards him. "But we don't love each other."

"Yet," he murmured, before kissing her just as the sun was setting and they passed under the bridge.

"Hmmm," she hummed as his hands wandered over her body inconspicuously. "I don't think it worked."

"Fine, eternal desire then," said Draco before kissing her again. "Can you handle that?"

Hermione laughed softly and pulled away, lest they give the man steering the gondola a private show. "I can deal with desire," she murmured as she laid her head on his shoulder. But that didn't mean that she would come to love him. She didn't really believe that any type of love could grow between them.

Desire and lust were there, along with attraction. Those were things she could deal with, but love felt very far away. She realized now that regardless of how he had won her over, a part of her would never surrender to him because of the way he had tied her to him. Maybe that was the part of her that would never forgive him, even though the rest of her had apparently done so already.

Hermione realized that her heart was shielding a part of herself that was just waiting for Draco to mess things up between them. That was why she couldn't love him.

She thought about those things as they walked back towards their hotel. The entire day had been tiring both physically and mentally and all she wanted was to take a nice, hot bath before dinner and then get some sleep.

Apparently, Draco had other things in mind besides taking a bath and having dinner. When they arrived, the suite's lights had been dimmed down and candles were placed everywhere. On the floor, there were rose petals of red and white the split towards two different places. One to the bedroom and the other towards the table, which was already set.

Hermione gave an interested look. "I never thought you were romantic," she said slyly.

"That only goes to show that there are many things that you have yet to learn about me," he said as he pulled her towards the bedroom.

"Draco, I'm tired," she said as he began to pull her clothes off.

"Contrary to what you may think, I don't have a one-track mind. We're going to take a nice, hot shower and then we'll have dinner," he said as he sat her on the sink of the bathroom and pulled her boots off.

"You know, I can undress myself," she pointed out.

Draco smirked. "But I want the pleasure of doing it myself. It's much more enjoyable this way."

Hermione gave him a look full of heat. "Does that mean that I get to undress you?" she asked, pink tinting her cheeks.

"If you use your teeth, yes."

She burst out laughing before his lips fell over hers.

It was a miracle that they made it into the shower without their clothes still on. The shower that followed was longer than the ones Hermione was normally used to, but much more enjoyable, and Draco proved that he did have a one track mind.

When they arrived back at the Manor after their vacation, Hermione was greeted by an ecstatic Narcissa and a pleased Lucius. Her mother-in-law even hugged her again when she saw them.

"Oh, I'm so happy for you both!" Narcissa said after hugging Draco as well.

"What are you talking about mother?" Draco asked her.

"Why, about the article that was published yesterday in the Daily Prophet. Didn't you two know about it?" she asked as she walked into the study and came back out with the paper. She handed it over to Draco and waited patiently for them to look over at the society pages.

Hermione's eyes grew huge when she saw that there was a picture of them kissing under the bloody Bridge of Sighs. There was a short little article that spoke of the legend Draco had told her about and a few more tidbits of their vacation and other random shots of them on different days and throughout various spots in Venice.

"Is there any way of putting a hit on Rita Skeeter?" Hermione fumed, trying not to think of what she would say to Harry and Ginny the next time they were alone. She was so dead.

"A painful one or a quick and painless one?" asked Lucius.

Hermione stared before she broke into peals of laughter. "Were you serious?" she asked.

Narcissa gave Lucius a look and he cleared his throat. "Of course not," he said dryly.

"So you two are giving each other a chance?" Narcissa asked with an expectant smile.

Hermione smiled in embarrassment and nodded. "We're giving things a try, but don't get your hopes up. We're not having any children yet," she said, wanting to get that clear from the very start.

"But you will be sleeping in the same room, right?" asked Lucius.

Draco wanted to hang his head in shame. Why were his parents so hell bent on interfering? He didn't want to scare Hermione away, though they were asking a valid question. He turned to look at Hermione and she shrugged.

"I guess we can give it a try, but if it's not working out, you go back to your room," she said.

Draco scoffed. "What? Why can't you move to my room?"

"Because I've become familiar with mine," she replied.

"Yeah, well I win because I've lived in this house longer than you."

"That's not fair!" she exclaimed.

"Yes it is. You can't win all the time, my dear," said Draco.

Hermione laughed darkly. "You clearly don't know me yet."

Lucius and Narcissa walked away from the childish couple as they kept arguing and talking nonsense. At least they were now within close proximity and no matter what Hermione said, Narcissa was getting the little nappies and booties ready for her first grandchild.

Blaise eyed her carefully from behind his menu. She was literally glowing. Maybe Malfoy had done something right for once, he mused. Her eyes met his and she blushed when he wiggled his eyebrows at her.

"You look great," he complimented.

Hermione smiled. "Thank you. But... why are you looking at me like that?"

"You're glowing. It seems to me that your trip with Malfoy were very good to you," he said with a smirk.

She laughed uncomfortably. "Let's talk about something else, why don't we?" she asked. "Are you seeing anyone at the moment?"

He gave her an uncomfortable look. "Yes. She's a wonderful girl that I really like. There's only one problem," he muttered.

Hermione gave him a questioning look when he stayed quiet. "Well? What's the problem?"

"She's kind of... taken already," he said softly.

The brunette's eyes narrowed. "You mean she's married? Shame on you Blaise Zabini!" she said in a scolding tone.

Blaise shook his head. "She's not married, but she does have a boyfriend. I mean, she says that he hasn't hinted on them being serious because they've been living together for three years now and he won't talk to her about marriage," he said and was very aware that he was speaking rapidly, trying to justify what he was doing to a woman that meant a lot to him.

Hermione sighed heavily. She supposed that this was better than Blaise pinning over her when she was married to his best friend. But she had to wonder if this woman was someone she knew. "Who is she?"

Blaise swallowed hard and was interrupted by the waitress as she walked over with their drinks and to take their orders. "Uh, you don't know her. She was a Slytherin a year before our class," he replied once the woman was gone.

Hermione knew that he was lying but left it at that. Then a thought crossed her mind. "It's not Greengrass, is it?" she asked in disgust.

He shook his head. "Merlin, no. She was a pretty girl, but she always thought that everything had to revolve around her. Besides, she was in our year."

"Good," Hermione said viciously. "That woman is going to cross me on one of my bad days and I won't be held accountable for my actions," she said.

Blaise just laughed and steered their conversation away from the woman he was seeing. They had a very pleasant lunch on her day off from work and then they took a walk down Hogsmeade for old time's sake. They talked about the week she had spent in Venice with Draco and of how he had met the girl he was now seeing.

As they walked down the long pathway that lead to the front doors of the Manor, their talk shifted to her long time dream. "Well, I have the piece of land that my in-laws gave to me for my birthday. I would have to take a look around to see how big it is and how long it will take for the structure to be built," she said as they reached the doors and walked in.

"Well, let me know if you need any help. I have architect friends who would probably give you a good price and quality without fear of being stolen from. One of them, I think, had a part in rebuilding the sections of Hogwarts that were destroyed during the war. I'll gather his information and then owl it to you."

Hermione nodded and smiled. "That would be so great. I've been gathering research and books on magical creatures, as well as people who actually want to go into the field. I have sponsors already who are very interested in seeing this thing through. There's a very limited amount of services for hurt and sick creatures. Can you just imagine how many creatures we'll be able help once I get to complete the trauma center?" she asked excitedly.

Her excitement was contagious and Blaise found himself smiling and willing to help her any way he could. That was when he noticed that Malfoy was lurking in the shadows. "Never pictured you as an eavesdropper, Malfoy," he said casually.

"I didn't know this was a private conversation," said Draco as he walked into the foyer.

Hermione shook her head. "It's not," she said, noticing the look on his face.

"Then why didn't you ever tell me about this dream of yours?" he asked quietly.

Blaise cleared his throat and gave Hermione's shoulder a squeeze. "I'll send you the information with the owl. Later, Malfoy. Hermione, it was great seeing you again," he said before leaving.

Hermione watched him go before turning back to her annoyed looking husband. "This was something that I haven't shared with many people. It's a dream I've had since I was in school. If you remember correctly, up until a week and-a-half ago we were still at each other's throats."

"So you confided in Zabini?" he asked.

She nodded. "I don't see what's so wrong about that. He's my friend, the same way Harry is my friend."

"Were you going to tell me at all?" Draco asked as he leaned against the wall.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. You have to understand that I'm barely getting used to the idea that we're going to be a real couple now. I let go of the hate I felt for you after you forced me into this marriage, but it's going to take some time to think of you as my husband. I feel like we're barely into the dating stage of a relationship, even before a couple becomes official."

"Even though we're shagging like newly weds?" Draco asked snidely.

"You're being asinine about this whole situation. Stop acting like I cheated on you just because I told a friend about what I want to accomplish before I told you. We'll talk more when you've calmed down," she snapped before moving up the steps.

Great, they were arguing because of Zabini again and Draco didn't like it, but he would be damned if he had to apologize to her first.

Hermione sat in her room fuming and trying to convince herself that she hadn't done anything wrong by not telling Draco about her dreams of making the trauma center. He was being childish and he knew it. What was the big deal about her not telling him of something she wanted to get done on her own? Now he would want to help her, and he would interfere. She wanted to do this on her own. Was that so hard to understand?

"Mistress? Mistress Hermione?" asked an elf excitedly, trying to get her attention.

She hadn't meant to ignore him, but she had still been cursing Draco in her head. "Yes, Beryl?" Hermione asked as she turned to look at the little creature after smoothing off the scowl that had been on her face.

"There's someone here to see you!"

Hermione frowned. "Who is it?"

"A mister Harry Potter! The boy who lived! The chosen one!" Beryl said in one breath.

"Oh, Merlin," Hermione gasped when she heard the name. What was she going to tell Harry about the article in the paper?

A cliffy, and I know that many of you will curse me for it, but I'm leaving it here because I've planned it this way for a while now. Okay, let me start by thanking those who reviewed the last chapter, it was heartening to read your reviews. I know that some of you were thinking that the, ahem..... "contact" between them happened too fast, but I've had an outline for this story since before I started to write it and this was the chapter where they would get involved. Besides, it works with the chapters that are to come and with the flow of the story in my opinion.

I would like to apologize for the grammatical errors and what not, but I'll be fixing this chapter and the one before sometime soon. Thanks again and I hope that everyone liked this chappy, even though there wasn't much action.

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 10: Revelations

And so I'm letting go of everything we were

It doesn't mean it doesn't hurt

Hermione took a moment to pull herself together before going downstairs to meet with her long time friend. But it appeared that he wasn't feeling particularly patient. Had he ever? She asked herself when he stormed into her room, his hand on a crumbled page from the paper.

"Just one question, Hermione. Is it true? Are you really a couple with him? Because those pictures don't look like fakes to me," Harry said after shutting the door.

She stood and moved to the opposite side of the room she and Draco had decided to take. It was neither his or her old room, this was an all new one and much larger than hers. Though she had really liked her old room, she and Draco had agreed to compromise and this had been the result. A new room.

"Hermione?" Harry asked pointedly.

There was no use lying to him. Hermione didn't think she could keep lying to her loved ones.

"No, Harry. Those pictures aren't lying. I'm—I'm giving Draco a chance to show me that we can make this marriage work."

For a long moment Harry said nothing, and Hermione felt fear race through her. Harry wasn't usually one to keep things bottled up, and the fact that he wasn't saying anything now was very scary. He then let out a long breath.

"You're telling me that you're going to give the man who ruined your life—and Ron's—a chance to actually convince you to see him as a good person? What the hell is wrong with you?" he exploded finally.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "Don't take that tone with me, Harry Potter. I'm a grown woman capable of making my own decisions."

"Well, it doesn't seem like you know how to make any good ones," he bit back.

"You know what? I'm not going to argue with you, Harry. You'd think that by now you would've learned how to ask questions and not jump the gun into something you'll regret saying," she said, moving towards the door and opening it. "If you can't at least listen to my reasons for doing this, you have to leave."

Harry took a moment to compose himself and finally sighed heavily. "Okay, I'm sorry for what I said. But it's just that I can't understand why you would do this after all the things he has done to you!"

Hermione nodded. "Let's go talk in the study. You and me alone in a room would be frowned upon," she said with a small smile. When he returned it, she let out a sigh of relief and walked out with him.

Once they were comfortable in the study, drinking some tea, Hermione explained everything to Harry. "I know that what he did was wrong, and I won't justify his actions, but he gave the

property back and lost all leverage he had at keeping me by his side. All he asked for was the chance that I see him as a real husband."

"Do you love him?" Harry asked, not even bothering to hide the disgust.

"No," she replied without hesitation. "But I do fancy him, and it's a start. We have a deal going that if I don't love him by our second anniversary, he'll give me the divorce."

A suspicious look crossed Harry's face. "And you believed him?"

Hermione shrugged half-heartedly. "Maybe I do."

Harry scowled. "Well, I don't. Hermione, I've got a question that's been nagging me since you married that man."

"Which is?"

"Did you sign any sort of pre-nup before you married him?" Harry asked seriously.

Hermione nodded and her thoughts strayed to the paper she had signed magically during the ceremony. She hadn't actually read the whole thing, but she had had the legal representatives of the Malfoy's explain what it was basically for. Her eyes narrowed. She had been so distraught that she hadn't even read the whole thing. She felt like slapping herself. She stood and moved towards a glass display case where there were pictures from past generations of Malfoy's on their wedding day and of the pre-nups and contracts that had been signed by both parties during the ceremony.

She placed her hand on the handle and it opened without a problem. She had heard Narcissa say once that the case opened only for a Malfoy by blood or by name. Hermione was a Malfoy by name so there was no problem. She reached over for the document she had signed, and pulled out a velvety green sleeve holding the legal papers. She walked back to the desk and pulled out the papers carefully, eyeing them all quickly. She found the pre-nup and read it from top to bottom, noticing now that there was a small note at the very bottom.

Harry had walked over to her side and was reading with her. He had to squint to see the note Hermione had seen and his eyes widened at what he read. "I knew there was something fishy about this! You need to get pregnant before your second anniversary in order to stay married! He just manipulated things!"

Hermione didn't know what to think, but she felt a bubbling sense of anger and betrayal in her gut. Of course, she had been right to distance her heart from this whole marriage deal. She had known in her gut that Malfoy would do something to make her lose her trust in him. "Stop putting ideas in my head, Harry. I want to make this marriage work somehow. But he's wrong if he thinks he can get me pregnant without my knowing it. If I can get him to admit that he loves me first, I will give him the child he wants," she heard herself saying.

Harry gave her an incredulous look. "I can't believe you're actually considering fulfilling that pre-nup! Have you even stopped to think how jaded a child of yours and Malfoy would be?"

Hermione glared at him. "It's so heartening to hear that you have that much faith in me as a mother," she spat. "Any child of mine would be happy because they would have me there to

protect them from anything."

Her best friend had the grace to look embarrassed. "Mione, I'm sorry, but it's just—this is just so wrong. The fact that you're even considering procreating with Malfoy," he said quietly, trailing off.

"I need you to trust me in this, Harry. You're the closest friend I've got and after those pictures in the paper, Ginny is going to want to claw my eyes out," Hermione said nervously.

"I'll talk to her, but you know how she is. It's just that we've kind hit a snag in our relationship and all that we've been doing lately is fighting and screwing. I don't think that's a very healthy relationship," he said darkly.

Hermione felt pity grow in her heart. She loved Harry very much but wasn't too sure that he and Ginny still belonged together. They were both just too hotheaded to make a real relationship work. "Are you thinking of breaking up with her?" she asked him.

Harry shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe we can have some sort of serious conversation in order to figure out where we're going. Maybe it is best for us to break up," he said sadly.

His brunette friend sighed heavily and hoped that Ginny didn't come out too broken up in this whole situation. "I hate to cut this short, Harry, but I need to go see my doctor," she said, standing and moving towards the door.

"For what?" asked Harry.

"I want to make certain that Draco hasn't accomplished what that pre-nup states. I don't think I would be able to deal with a kid right now," she replied.

Harry scowled. He would throttle Malfoy if he really had knocked up Hermione behind her back. "Mind if I go with you?" he called as she called an accio for her purse.

"Sure, but you'll have to wait outside," Hermione said with a smirk. Harry just nodded and accompanied her to the Healer's office.

Hermione sat in a chair at the Healer's office fidgeting and trying very hard to remain calm. It hadn't hit her until now that she may have been pregnant already and she hadn't really taken in the thought of being a mother.

If by any twist of fate she was, of course she would be happy, but she would also start to hate Draco all over again for going behind her back and doing this. She didn't want to be pregnant. Not yet.

The Healer gave her a kind smile. "Nervous?"

"Very," Hermione said with a forced laugh. "I'm not ready for a child yet, and neither is my husband."

"If the test results come back positive, there are other alternatives if you do not want to have it," she said slowly.

Hermione shook her head. "I wouldn't be able to do anything like abortion or adoption. I don't have it in me," she said seriously.

The Healer nodded and stood when there was a knock at her door. A medi-witch walked in and handed her a small stack of papers. The Healer thanked her and lead her out the door. Then she turned to Hermione, a smile on her face.

Hermione felt her stomach hit her feet when the other woman smiled that way. This couldn't be possible. She took in a deep breath and tried to remain calm. "Please, just tell me!"

"Well, the tests came back and you are perfectly healthy, and... not pregnant. The potion you drink once a month to regulate your periods has prevented it from happening. Now unless you drink a fertility potion to counter the effects of that one, you should be fine, or if you just decide not to drink your monthly dosage. Everything else seems to be in order," the Healer said with a smile.

The brunette smiled in relief and stood, shaking her hand. "Thank you very much for giving me great news. When I'm ready for a baby, I'll know, but for now I just want to wait."

"What about your husband? Doesn't he want to be a father yet?" asked the Healer.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I get the feeling that he's trying to get me pregnant behind my back, but he doesn't know that I'm drinking that potion," she said slyly.

"Well, I hope things work out the way you want them to, and remember that you have an appointment in two months so that we can check if the potion is making things more regular," she said, walking Hermione to the door.

"Thank you again," Hermione said before walking out and to a nervous looking Harry Potter.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

"Nothing," she said with a grin. "There's no bun in the oven."

Harry laughed and gave her a squeeze. "How about we go to that bakery place in Diagon Alley and we try out that dark chocolate cake?"

Hermione nodded. "I like the sound of that!" she said happily. There was no baby on the way and wouldn't be until she decided that she wanted to be a mother. She was done with Draco manipulating her into situations, and there wasn't going to be a little Malfoy jr. until she decided.

Draco scowled to himself in the dark. Granger hadn't spoken to him all evening and when she had come to their bedroom, she had just taken a shower—after locking the door—and then had settled into bed without a word. Judging by the sound of her breathing, she was already asleep while he was up and having a hard time with his thoughts.

She'd had a point when she had said that up until a few weeks ago they had been at each other's throats, but still, why hadn't she talked about her trauma center with him during the week in Venice? They'd been perfectly friendly in each other's company then and he had learned

many things about her childhood and of her likes and dislikes.

He knew that she loved to eat her bagels with cream cheese and jelly, she liked her coffee with cream and no sugar, she hated her nails because they were too short to her liking, and that there was a raggedy stuffed bear her father had given to her years ago that she treasured more than any jewel she owned. She also loved cats and was allergic to certain types of birds, which he had found very amusing.

Draco watched her as she flipped over and moved into his arms, her face pressed to his neck. It was such a subconscious move it made something tighten in his chest. He ran a gentle hand through her hair and pressed a kiss to her jaw.

"Why aren't you asleep?" she murmured quietly.

"I was thinking about you," he replied.

She gave a sleepy smile. "Are you ready to apologize?"

Draco scowled. "It all depends on whether or not you want to see it as an apology," he said before his hands started to wander over her body.

That pushed away the veil of sleep Hermione had been in since she had realized he was awake. All she could see in the dark was the shine in those pale eyes of his. She supposed that it wouldn't be so bad to have a child with eyes like that, but the fact that he hadn't even talked to her about it was keeping her from actually letting him get her pregnant.

"So it's a win win situation for me," Hermione said with a breathy laugh.

"Why is that?"

"If I take it as an apology, I win. If I don't, I still win," she said as her eyes closed in bliss when his hand caressed south.

Draco gave a snort before kissing her.

Lucius gave his son and the boy's wife a scrutinizing look. They were both in a very agreeable mood this morning. It was too bad that it wouldn't last, he mused. He would just wait for them to finish eating until he told Draco why his day would go to hell.

As they drank their morning coffees and discussed what they would do during the day, Draco noticed that there was something bothering his father. It was in the set of his shoulders. He looked tense. "Is something the matter?" Draco asked.

Lucius just nodded and handed over the paper, which Draco hadn't even remembered to read this morning. "You're going to have a stressful day."

"What? Why?" Draco asked as he took the paper and read. His eyes narrowed and he cursed colorfully.

"Draco, what have I told you about using that type of language at the breakfast table?" Narcissa

asked as she took a sip of her fruit juice.

"What's wrong?" Hermione asked with a frown.

"It says here that someone tipped off the authorities because there were concerns that my company is using low quality materials for my merchandise and then we're charging it at a high price!" he said indignantly, standing and moving towards the study. "I need to fix this right away."

"Good luck," Hermione muttered as she looked at her in-laws. "I'm afraid I must get going as well," she said, standing up and saying goodbye to Narcissa and Lucius.

When she arrived at work, Neville had a stack of papers for her to read and there were three reports to be written about the raid that had taken place the day before on an illegal dragon breeding ranch right there in London.

"Are those things in the paper true? I mean about Malfoy's stores?" Neville asked as he went through some papers he had to organize.

"Of course not. He may have been a Slytherin in school, but the man has principles and he's not a thief. His merchandise is top quality," Hermione said darkly, taking a look at her notes from yesterday.

"That's good, because I just bought myself one of those really nifty snitches that follow you around the room instead of you following them. I was beginning to wonder if it would explode in my flat or something," he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She had somehow known that Neville would be the type of people to buy useless things. "Draco will fix this. Now let's get to work because I want to get out of here on time," she said.

Neville nodded in agreement but then remembered something. "You know, Cormac McLaggen is also going to open a Quidditch store and he boasts about having better prices at top quality than Malfoy's store."

"What?" Hermione asked with a scowl. "How do you know?"

"Parvati is writing an article about him for Witch Weekly," Neville replied. He and Parvati were married and expecting their first baby. She was only four months along.

So McLaggen was behind the rumors. She just knew it. Bastard. "I think I'm going to pay that bastard a visit during lunch," she said quietly.

"You say something?" Neville asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No. Nothing."

"Mr. McLaggen?"

"Yes?" he asked from his desk, where he was currently leaning back in his chair and drinking a

glass of firewhiskey; no matter that it was only twelve in the afternoon.

"There is a Mrs. Hermione Malfoy here to see you," his secretary said. "I told her you were busy, but she threatened to blast your door off of its hinges if I didn't come and tell you."

Cormac sat up straight and smiled slowly. "Let her in, Elaine. Whenever she comes here just show her in unless I am with a client or my wife," he said. His secretary nodded and walked out. His smile grew as he watched her walk in. Even in a plain, long-sleeved shirt and a pair of slacks she looked amazing. There was also a dangerous gleam in her eyes and he had to admit that he was surprised. She had figured him out rather quickly. "How can I help you, Mrs. Malfoy?" he asked in a mocking tone.

Hermione scowled. "You really are petty," she spat. "Throwing dirt at Draco's company so that the public goes for your store instead of his is just plain dirty."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, faking innocence.

She didn't believe him for a second. "Did you think I wouldn't figure it out? I guess that being rejected by the same woman twice is a major blow to the ego," she said snidely.

Cormac's eyes narrowed. "And while you keep denying me, your dear husband will pay. I have sources, Hermione. I can ruin his business and make his life a living hell."

Hermione gave him a cold smile. "You don't know Draco if you think you can get away with that. He'll bury you. Nothing in this world will ever make me accept you. You make me sick," she spat.

He stood and moved towards her, but before he was too close, Hermione had her wand in her hand and trained on the spot between his eyes. "Put the wand down, Hermione. If you came here alone then you did so for a reason. Stop playing hard to get."

Hermione kept her arm firm. "Come any closer and I will protect myself. I don't want anything to do with you. I came here alone because I am confident in my skills just in case you want to get fresh with me. Don't think I've forgotten what happened at your bar. I am here to give you a warning."

"Oh, that's rich. You're here to threaten me?" Cormac asked with a loud chuckle, trying to grab Hermione's arm, but she countered by driving her elbow into his gut with all of her strength, the same way she had done at the bar.

"I told you not to come close to me. I don't like you touching me. If you try to hurt Draco in any way, whether in business or physical sense, I will hurt you. I have sources as well, Cormac. Don't cross me," she said before she moved towards the door. "And I don't believe I ever gave you permission to call me by my first name. If we see each other in public, it's Mrs. Malfoy to you," she said before leaving.

Cormac snarled and rubbed at his hurting middle. This was the second time she caught him off guard and it wasn't going to happen again. The next time he would be ready. He was getting sick and tired of the wench denying that she felt any type of interest. Whether she wanted to or not, she would be his.

After she left McLaggen's office, Hermione saw that she still had about forty minutes left in her lunch time and decided to go check on Draco. When she arrived at his office, there were a bunch of reporters standing outside and she instantly regretted not being able to Floo in. She had to literally push her way through the questions and the camera flashes saying, "No comment." The door opened for her easily and she shut it before any of the reporters could sneak in with her.

"Welcome, Mrs. Malfoy," the secretary said as she spotted her. "I am Denise and it's a pleasure to meet you."

"Thank you, Denise. It's great to meet you too. Is Draco here?" she asked.

Denise nodded. "We've had a very bad day. He's speaking with the publicist and the lawyers right now, but the meeting should be over in about five minutes. Would you like to wait?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. I'll wait."

"Would you like anything to drink?"

"Water would be fine," Hermione said as she sat and waited for Draco's meeting to be over. She took a moment to look around and was just mildly surprised to see that the place was very lightly decorated but screamed expensive. The scarce decoration made the office look huge and peaceful.

She looked up when Draco walked out with a group of men and women, talking softly and nodding. He thanked them and then spotted her waiting for him, a surprised look on his face. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Shouldn't you be at lunch?"

Hermione shrugged and walked over to press a kiss to his cheek. "I wanted to come see how you were doing," she said with a smile, thanking his secretary when she handed her a glass of water.

Draco walked her into his office and sighed heavily. "Not very good," he said. "The Ministry took the rumors seriously and are threatening to close my shops for a week while they take a look at the merchandise as well as the components used to make the merchandise. If they do that, I'll sue them for all they're worth, so I was meeting with my publicist and my lawyers so an official statement can be made."

Hermione frowned. "Wouldn't it look better if you made the statement?"

He nodded. "I will, just not now. I don't have the time for it. First I need to fix all of this."

"Draco, if I told you I knew who was behind all this, would you promise me not to do something foolish?" Hermione asked.

Draco's eyes narrowed and he stepped towards her. "You know who did this?"

She nodded. "Promise me that you won't make this a complete scandal. You have to find a way to get back at him in a legal sense that won't cause anymore repercussions for you or your business."

"Fine, fine. Just tell me," he said impatiently.

"McLaggen."

"What?! How do you know that it was him?"

Hermione cleared her throat. "I went to see him a little while ago and he admitted that he had been the one to start the rumor. He's going to open a store as well and he's trying to pile dirt on yours so that people will go to his. Also, he's been hinting that he wants us to have an affair. In Venice, he asked me to go with him to some place quieter while you and his wife talked."

Draco's eyes narrowed in anger. "I'll knock his teeth out," he snarled.

"You promised you wouldn't do anything stupid!" Hermione argued.

"Well, I take it back."

"Draco," she said slowly. "You need to make this situation better, not worse. Look, there's something I want to show you, but I don't know if you'll be free when I get off work."

"I've done what I can here, now I just have to wait for word from my lawyers as they negotiate with the Ministry." He sidled up next to her and smirked. "What did you want to show me?"

Hermione gave him a baleful look at the glint in his eyes. Men. "I can't tell you that because it's a surprise, but you have to pick me up at work in two hours."

Draco smiled slowly and ran his lips over her jaw, stopping to kiss her slowly. "Why don't we just go now?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? No, I have a job I love and one I want to keep," she said before moving to his door. "Don't be late!" she called before she was gone, not catching the annoyed look on Draco's face.

Hermione went back to work and got a very decent amount of work done, including the reports she hadn't finished in the morning and some filing she had neglected for a few days. Neville was happy. Draco was on time to pick her up and she grabbed her purse and her coat and walked with him towards the main floor so that they could use the apparition point.

When they arrived to their destination, Draco frowned as his eyes fell on an abandoned villa sitting in front of them. It was huge, stretching out as wide as the Manor, but only two stories high. "It's a dump," said Draco as he looked at it.

Hermione glared at him and walked him inside. "Of course, you idiot. It's been abandoned for nearly thirty years. But I wanted you to be the first to see it."

"Why?" he asked.

She smiled and turned in a circle, motioning to the structure. "I know that you were mad that I didn't tell you about the trauma center, so I wanted to show you that I am making an effort to make us work. I also wanted you to be the first to see and step foot inside what will soon be my

dream come true," she said with a smile.

Draco was truly touched by her words, but he merely smirked and pulled her into his arms. "It looks great," he lied.

"Stop lying," Hermione said with a laugh. "I know that it needs a lot of work, but now that I know that it's here, I can find people to remodel it. Blaise said that he knew some people that were good at their job and weren't thieves." She noticed Draco scowling at the mention of his friend. "And stop making that face. He's still your friend and he doesn't like me. He's told me all about this girl he's dating. I think he may be in love with her!"

Draco gave her a look full of pity. "Granger," he started, reverting to old times. "He likes shagging her. Hasn't he told you who he's with?" She shook her head and he flashed her a smile. "Well then, I'll give you a hint. She's Potter's ex-girlfriend and she has a loud mouth."

Hermione gasped in disbelief. "You're lying!"

"Nope."

"Ginny is cheating on Harry?!"

"Yep."

"I have to tell him!"

"Nope."

"Why not?" Hermione asked, eyes narrowed.

"Because he's shagging someone else. A woman he hasn't told you about," said Draco smugly.

"What?!" she asked, almost hyperventilating at the information she had just been privy to. "And how do you know all of this? I can hardly picture Harry and Ginny telling you anything."

"That's because it wasn't them. Zabini let it slip a few days ago when he visited me at the office. As for Potter, I can't tell you who is seeing him, but she told me as well. I think she's in love," Draco said as he wrapped an arm around Hermione's waist and gave her a smart look. Then he bent his head and kissed her slowly. "I appreciate that you showed me this place."

Hermione managed a smile. Though she still had some serious doubts about them making their marriage work, she wanted to try. She was keeping the clause in their pre-nup in mind as well. There would be no child before he admitted he loved her and said it first, and if he didn't say it before their second anniversary, then that meant that their marriage wouldn't work. It saddened her a bit to think that, but if he wasn't going to love her, what was the point of bringing a child to this world, to parents who didn't love each other?

She didn't love him, but she felt that if he made the effort and showed her that he was a good man, she could come to love him as much as she had loved Ron. Those feelings for her best friend were still there, but not as strong. Her heart and mind had finally come to terms with the fact that he was married and that they wouldn't be together ever again.

"What are you thinking?" Draco asked as he ran a hand through her long hair.

Hermione just shook her head and smiled. "I'm thinking about where everything is going to go."

"Tell me," he said quietly. And he listened as she gave him detailed descriptions of where she wanted things to be, from the welcome desk to the fire-proof section where fire-breathing creatures would be able to go. The smaller creatures would be treated on the second floor right across from the clinic where non-emergency's would be located. She had a huge vision, but it wasn't unattainable and Draco found that he would do anything to make her keep that excited and joyful look on her face, and though he promised not to do anything regarding McLaggen, Draco was already contemplating revenge. No one, but no one messed with him and got away from it unscathed.

Hermione was on her way to the study for a book to read on her Saturday afternoon. She knew that Draco was there working, so she would make her trip quick. As she approached the open doors, she noticed that Lucius was in there as well. She hadn't really seen him walk in. Now, normally she wasn't one to eavesdrop, but she was curious as to what Lucius was saying.

"Tick, tock."

Draco looked up from the paperwork he had strewn over the desk in the study and gave his father a questioning look. "What?"

"Time is ticking and there is no child on the way. Have you talked to her about having brats? Maybe she's waiting for you to touch the subject," said Lucius as he sat in front of Draco.

"We've been together for only a month, father. Besides, getting her pregnant behind her back isn't something that I really want to do. If I do, all it will succeed in is getting her to hate me again," Draco said, and Hermione smiled. He was on the right track to winning her over completely.

"Do you want her to leave when the two years are up? Remember, she'll be taking half of your inheritance," Lucius said, making Hermione scowled. Even if things didn't work out and she and Draco ended up divorced, she wouldn't take one knut from him.

"The money doesn't matter. And no, I don't want her to leave me at the end of the two years," Draco admitted with a heavy sigh. Hermione bit her lip and kept listening.

"Then this grandchild of mine has to come now. If you don't do something, then I will."

Draco gave his father a snide look. "I hardly think Hermione will allow you to impregnate her so that you can save our marriage," he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. Hermione made a disgusted face at the thought.

"Fool, I mean talk to her, get things straight and put them on the table. You don't know what her thoughts on children are," said his father.

"Fine. I'll talk to her about it and see what she thinks."

Hermione moved away from the door as silently as she could and made her way to the gardens.

She already knew what she thought. There would be no child if there was no love. Her mind was made up. And if there was never any love, then there would be no marriage anymore and they would go their separate ways at the two-year mark.

The thought of it ending that way brought a bitter taste to Hermione's mouth and she hoped that she wasn't the one who ended up falling in love with him without him reciprocating.

Okay, so I'm on the right track and though the chap was a little boring, the best is yet to come. Please believe me. I would like to thank everyone who reviewed the last chapter and who awaited this chapter patiently. Draco is such a gossip and Hermione now holds an ace for her confrontation with Ginny, which is coming up! Can anyone guess who Harry's mystery gal is? Hmm?

Well, I was doing a lot of thinking yesterday about what the trauma center should be called and I couldn't come up with a creative name, so I would like to ask you guys for help. Give me suggestions on what it should be called, and there's only one request... just include the words trauma center and clinic in the title, okay? Thanks a bunch in advanced and try to be as creative as possible. If there are many, I can hold a poll in the next chapter and you can all vote to see which title suits it best!

Anyway, thanks again everyone for the patience and the concerns and I hope you all have a great week! Can't wait to see OOTP when it hits the movies! And sorry about the typos and grammar errors! I usually type this is one go and then post it. Then I print out a copy and fix the errors, but the really jam is trying to get back on my computer to actually fix them. See ya!

Byebye

!Joey!

P.S.

Shameless plug, I have another penname which you can find on my bio page that will take you to my Final Fantasy VII fics(There are only two right now). So if anyone likes that fandom, check them out and let me know what you think!

Chapter 11: Greatest Victory

Warning: Adult scene towards the end...

We built it up to watch it fall

Like we meant nothing at all

Instead of waiting for the fire-breathing dragon that went by the name of Ginny Weasley to come see her and scream her head off, Hermione asked her to come see her at the office. So, here

she sat, waiting for her friend to come and she was already five minutes late. "Hey, Ginny," she heard Neville say outside.

"Hey, Nev. Is she in there?"

"Yes, go right in," he replied.

Hermione stood and walked over to close the door once she had stepped in. The brunette's eyes narrowed as she looked at her long time friend and took her wand to place a sound-proof spell on the room.

"I know that there are some things we need to talk about," said Ginny.

Hermione nodded and sat back down at her desk. "Yes there are. Many disturbing things." She saw the red-head's cheeks color in anger.

"Harry told me that you're giving Malfoy a chance?" Ginny asked calmly.

"Yes. Did he also tell you why?" Hermione asked her.

Ginny nodded but then stood and began to curse. "How in the hell is it possible for you to be giving that man a chance to 'make you happy.' It's absurd that after all the shit he put you and my brother through, he gets away with you forgiving him!" she yelled.

"Calm down Ginny! This is the same discussion I had with Harry. This is my decision and no one has a right to question it. I know what I'm doing," she snapped.

"What you're doing is stupid!" Ginny yelled at her.

"Don't yell at me!" Hermione said, standing up and walking around her desk to stand in front of her friend. "You and Harry don't have a right to talk to me as if I'm a child!"

"I can't believe that you would stoop low enough to become the whore of a man who has done nothing but hate you all this time," Ginny snarled. Her head snapped sideways when Hermione's hand made contact with her cheek.

"Don't you dare call me a whore when we both know that at least I am doing this with my husband, while you—you're with..... Never mind," Hermione said darkly.

The red-head took the slap and did not return it or argue about it. She had been out of line and she knew it. But her blood had run cold at Hermione's last words. She couldn't possibly know. Ginny decided to ignore them. "We're trying to make you see that you're making the wrong decision!" she snarled, shoving her chair aside and continuing her cursing. Hermione wondered if she talked that way in front of her mother.

"So, cheating on Harry was a good decision?" Hermione asked her softly.

Ginny froze with her back to her. "What did just ask me?"

"Answer me, Gin. You think that what you're doing isn't stupid?" she asked in the same quiet tone. What came next surprised her far more than anything Ginny had ever done. She sat down

again and started to cry. Hermione had never seen her cry before and it was terribly disconcerting.

"I loved Harry more than my life, Hermione. But our relationship went down the drain. I had the feeling that he was seeing someone else and it didn't hurt the way it should've. So I decided to find someone else. It started as him being a shoulder for me to cry on. Then when Harry started to come home late, I met with him at hotels and he would make me feel loved again."

"Do you love him?" Hermione asked.

Ginny rubbed furiously at her tears. "Yes. But I don't know if he loves me back. We're not even a legitimate couple yet." She let out a long breath. "How did you find out about it?"

"I can't tell you that. But, Gin, you need to end things with Harry. If you think that your relationship with him isn't worth saving and there is no more love, just let him go. Let him be happy, and you be happy yourself," Hermione said.

Ginny cleared her throat and nodded, but her nose was still red and her eyes watery. "I just wish that things could've gotten better. I love Harry, Hermione, but not the way that we need to be a happy couple. We broke up yesterday evening."

Hermione stood and walked over to hug Ginny tightly. "You see, Gin? We all make the decisions that we think are the best and we don't expect other people to demand us to change our minds. Even though you broke up with Harry, you still cheated on him. Things between me and Draco have changed for the better and I want to try to make things work."

Ginny nodded reluctantly and found that she finally understood. Though she still hated Malfoy with a passion for hurting her brother, she respected Hermione and her ability to always think things through more than twenty times before actually doing something. "Okay, Hermione. I'll let this go, but this doesn't mean that I will ever accept that man as your husband. I want my family to forgive you for the whole ordeal with Ron, but I don't think it'll be easy."

"That would be great," Hermione said with a smile.

"Come to dinner at the Burrow on Saturday night. Just... don't bring Malfoy. My father and mother will probably end up hexing him before he even steps into the house," Ginny said.

"That's fine. But are you sure that your parents won't just jinx me before I step into the house?" she asked nervously.

Ginny shook her head and stood. "Don't worry about it. Just know that Lavender and Ron will be there and that they're expecting their first baby."

Hermione felt something in her heart twitch at the news. Though she still loved Ron on some distant level, she was happy that they were going to be a complete family now. "That's good for them."

Ginny smiled. "Though I don't particularly like Lavender, I'm happy that I'm going to be an aunt." She moved to hug Hermione again and sighed heavily. "Do you know who Harry is with now?" she asked softly.

Hermione shook her head. "No. My source wouldn't tell me. But believe me, Gin. I'm going to find out and then Harry is going to get an earful from me as well. Is he going to be there on Saturday?" she asked.

The red-head shrugged. "I suppose. Unless it's too uncomfortable for him to sit at the table with his ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend."

"You're taking Blaise to your family so soon after breaking up with Harry?" Hermione blurted.

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "I'll find a way to make you give up your source and then I'm going to murder him or her," she said darkly. "But yes, to answer your question, yes I am going to take my new boyfriend home to my family. This is why I'm with him, Hermione. He doesn't care that my parents will hate him because I left Harry for him. He's been such a great support for me and things are so different from what I used to have with Harry."

Hermione nodded and smiled. Ginny really was in love. "Well then, the best of luck to you both."

"I guess that the same goes for you," her friend said in annoyance.

The brunette laughed and just shook her head. "Thanks. Don't worry about me. I know what I'm doing."

"I hope so Hermione, I really do," Ginny said before opening the door and breaking the sound-proof barrier.

"Gin, I'm sorry about the slap. I had no right to treat you that way," said Hermione ruefully.

She stopped before she was out the door and turned to Hermione. "I was out of line, Hermione. I deserved it. But next time you hit me, it'll be war between us."

Hermione smiled. "You wouldn't be Ginny if it wasn't."

Her friend grinned but it turned sour. "You're not pregnant too, are you?" she asked.

Hermione scoffed. "Of course not," she replied, walking back to her desk and waving at her friend as she left. Well, that had gone pretty well, considering the fact that Ginny was highly more volatile than anyone else she knew. All she needed now was to have another talk with Harry.

Draco watched Hermione as she got ready for her dinner with the Weasley's. She was wearing a simple black dress that clung to her curves and slim waist and reached her knees. It showed a long line of cleavage and had long sleeves. Along with it she wore a pair of black boots that placed her almost at his height without him wearing any shoes. Her long hair was pulled back into a high pony-tail and she was in the process of applying her make-up.

He was stretched out on their bed and was watching her silently. He forced back a scowl as he remembered her saying that he hadn't been invited. Hermione noticed it from his reflection in the mirror and smiled slowly. "I've already explained to you how important it is for me to make-up with these people. Aside from my mother—and you—they're my family," she said gently.

Draco stood and walked over to stand behind her, placing his hands against the wall behind the mirror. His lips were against her ear as he spoke. "It does something funny to my ego to hear you say that I'm your family."

"And here I thought you would say it does something funny to your heart. But I guess it kind of slipped my mind that you don't have a heart," she said smugly.

He let out a low chuckle that made her body tighten in places that she didn't want to think about at the moment. She turned around so that they were standing dangerously close and she gave him a questioning look. "Stop looking at me like that. I have somewhere to be and I can't be late," she said, eyes narrowed.

Draco smiled slowly and leaned forward to brush his lips against hers in a feather-light caress. Then he turned and walked back towards their bed. "Don't be too late and don't get too drunk. As much as I would love to take advantage of you in that state, I really don't want you singing again or passing out in the middle of us shagging," he said dryly. He had to duck when a comb was hurtled with deadly accuracy at his head.

"Don't wait up, hon," Hermione said before grabbing her purse and walking out the door. She heard a series of grumbles that made her smirk in amusement before she was out of earshot. She decided to apparate to the outskirts of the Burrow and when she did, she found that Molly and Arthur were standing outside, as if waiting for her. She approached them slowly, feeling as if she moved too fast, they would bolt. "Good evening," she said, offering a small smile.

Arthur returned it, but Molly did not. "How are you, Hermione?" he asked.

"Great," she said honestly. "Though I've missed all of you terribly."

Molly looked away and it seemed to Hermione that her bottom lip was trembling. "You should've thought of that before you married that... that... horrid, pale man," she said tearfully.

"I did. I loved Ron, but never the way he deserved and I'm sorry that things didn't turn out the way we all wanted, but I want to make amends. Ron has already forgiven me," Hermione said.

"Molly, she most likely convinced that boy to give us back our home. Shouldn't we at least be grateful because of that? He gave it back, with no string attached and he even told us that he had done it for her," Arthur said gently to his wife.

Molly nodded. "But I wanted her and Ron to end up together. I didn't want my boy to be stuck with that... that self-centered cow!" she said darkly.

Hermione had to smile. At least they shared the same thoughts on Lavender. "If this is too much for you to stomach, I can leave," she offered. "The last thing I want is to cause you anymore discomfort."

The older woman shook her head and stepped towards her, a very small smile on her face. "I guess Arthur is right. We can't keep holding grudges now that both you and Ron have moved on. But Hermione..... are you happy?" she asked, unconvinced.

The brunette thought about it for a second. Was she happy? "Yes," she found herself saying. And she guessed it was true. Though she and Draco continued to have their little spats about

anything inane, she liked to spend time with him, getting to know him better. She knew now that he was a picky eater. He ate nothing containing onions, and he was allergic to green beans. He took his coffee without cream and with two teaspoons of sugar. As a boy he had fallen off his broom twice and broken the same arm—his left one—and he had a scar where the bone had protruded from. His father had taught him from age ten about the Malfoy fortunes and companies, and he had placed half of his allowance for ten years into the equivalent of the stock market of the muggle world, but was handled by the Goblins. So the man was filthy rich on his own, without the inheritance he had received from his father.

"That's good," Molly said sincerely. "And I hope—I really do—that you and Ron made the right decision by marrying other people. But... from now on, you are welcome in our home," she said before taking Hermione into a warm hug. "And thank you, for convincing your husband to give us back our home."

"There's no need to thank me. I would've skinned him alive if he hadn't given your home back," Hermione replied with a grin.

Arthur smiled at them and watched as both women tried to hold their tears in. Hermione had always been like another daughter to them, and in all honesty, he had known from the start that a relationship between her and Ron would've been disastrous. "How about we go start dinner? I think I just heard Ron and lavender arrive."

"Um, Arthur, is Ginny here yet?" Hermione asked casually.

He nodded and looked glum. "She arrived a few minutes ago. She had an unexpected guess on her arm and she told us flat out that she and Harry were over. That she was with someone else now as well as the fact that Harry was with another woman now too."

"I don't know what's wrong will all of you children from the same generation. You say you love someone and then you turn around and you're with someone else," Molly grumbled as they walked back into the modest little home.

"Come along, Hermione," Arthur said, ushering her in. "You're not pregnant too, are you?"

Why was everyone asking her that? Hermione laughed dryly. "No. and I don't plan to be for a very long time," she said before they sat down at the table and had a nice family dinner. When Draco had forced her into their marriage, she had thought that she would've never been able to enjoy these type of family gatherings again. But she guessed that the entities or whatever controlled the universe couldn't have been so cruel with her. She had her family again.

When Pansy owed her so that they could go shopping on the following Saturday, Hermione was a bit surprised. Though they were on friendly terms now, the ex-Slytherin said that she needed someone with a level-head to talk to. So Hermione agreed to go with her to Diagon Alley. As they walked slowly, sipping on ice-cold coffees after having lunch, Hermione had a thought. She wondered if Pansy was the one who was seeing Harry now and wanted nothing better but to ask her, though she feared that she and the other woman were not yet to that point in a friendship.

"So," said Pansy. "How is life with Draco?"

"Tolerable," Hermione said with a smile. "He can be a bit self-centered and immature when he wants to be."

"That I know," Pansy said, grinning. "Let's go take a look at that new store that just opened. They carry racy lingerie that I'm sure your man will love."

Hermione turned three different types of red and followed the other woman. The store carried very nice pieces that Hermione liked but wasn't too convinced about buying. As she and Pansy took a look around, the employees fawned over them both because it was widely known that both belonged to rich families.

"I don't like suck-ups," Pansy murmured to her.

The brunette gave a small snort and nodded in agreement, but before she could say another word, they were nearly blindsided by a blonde with narrowed eyes and a curled lip. "Look who we have here! Mrs. Malfoy and Miss Parkinson," she said with a sneer at them both.

"Hello, Daphne," said Pansy. "You're looking as superficial as always. Have you gotten any reconstructive work done on your nose? It looks a little lopsided," she said venomously.

"Unlike you, my dear, I was graced with natural beauty. That's something not many witches can say," she said, eying both Pansy and Hermione.

Hermione smiled slowly, but it didn't reach her eyes. "Then in any case, you can't say it either. Natural beauty, my arse."

"Which is nonexistent," said Daphne.

Pansy slapped her before Hermione had a chance to say or do anything herself. "Don't talk to her like that! You're a guinea pig on legs when it comes to reconstructive spells. Hermione and I are all natural."

"Don't slap her, Pansy," said Hermione. "You may risk slapping off her fake nose!"

"Don't you dare speak to me, you husband-stealing-fortune-hunting cow! I know that you've been trying to seduce Cormac, but he wants nothing to do with you!" Daphne yelled; the more people heard her, the better. "But he won't fall for your tricks. He knows that I am way above you!"

Hermione's mouth dropped in shock. "How dare you?! I would never stoop low enough to be with a married man! I'm not like you, who keeps trying to worm your way into Draco's pants. Have you noticed, Daphne, that he doesn't even give you the time of day?"

Daphne screamed before slapping Hermione. Then all hell broke loose and the women forgot that they had wands and magic in order to battle. Hermione knew it was highly immature and that their fight would most likely end up on the tabloids, but she didn't care. This woman had been asking for it for a very long time. It really wasn't a fair fight because it was two against one, but Daphne bared sharp, manicured nails and came very close to clawing out someone's eye before Hermione placed her in a sleeper hold she had learned from one of her muggle cousin, Albert, who had used it on her once before she had kicked him in the shin.

"I'll release you if you promise to calm down! We've done enough damage to the store. Which we will all pay for," she said the last part to the manager who had kept her distance but had been watching in rapt attention.

"Choke her now!" Pansy said viciously.

"We'll go to prison," Hermione remarked dryly.

"Unhand me you waste of magic and oxygen!" Daphne screeched, struggling. Hermione released her abruptly and the blonde fell face first onto the ground. "This isn't over! You're both going to pay for doing this to me!" she yelled before she stood and stormed out of the shop.

Hermione and Pansy walked over to the counter to pay for their share of the damage. The young girl at the cashier was looking at them with a grin. "Can I have your autographs? It was just so amazing how you both put her in her place!"

"Sure," Pansy said, preening and taking the quill that the girl handed over. She signed a magazine that had featured an article of her and Hermione signed over the article that featured her and Draco's dates in the past month.

"How much are you willing to bet that this will be in Evening Prophet?" Hermione asked her as they made their way towards the apparition point.

"I don't mind, but I can just hear your mother-in-law's voice in my head talking about acting correctly in front of the press," Pansy said with a smirk.

Hermione sighed and nodded. "I know exactly what you mean. But there's nothing to do now. There's going to be a scandal regardless of what we say. It was you and I against one woman."

Pansy shrugged. "I'm just happy she'll have a shiner to ruin her 'perfect' little face," she said smugly. They reached the apparition point but had done very little shopping. "We should do this again; we hardly had time to shop."

The brunette nodded and smiled. "We should. Just owl me a few days before the day you want us to go out so that I can keep the day free. And maybe we'll stumble into Daphne again."

"Take care," Pansy said before she left. Hermione followed and arrived at the Manor just as Draco was stepping out of the study. His eyes widened as he took in her face and Hermione reached up to touch her cheek before wincing in pain.

"You and Pans not getting along?" he asked, wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

"Pansy was great. We had fun, but we ran into Daphne," Hermione started, a scowl on her face as she looked in a mirror and saw that there were three scratches on her cheek. Pansy had had similar marks on her neck. At Draco's questioning look she sighed. "We got into a fight with her, inside of a store. I'll expect something to be mentioned in the Prophet."

Draco sighed and took her to their bedroom and then to the bathroom, sitting her on the sink. Then he drew a potion from behind the mirror and rubbed it over the cuts. It felt like mint and for a few seconds it was unbearable, but then the sensation stopped and she looked in the mirror to see that the cuts were gone. "That balm came in handy after my Quidditch games," he said

before he leaned over to kiss her.

Hermione smiled and pushed him away. "Thanks. But I don't think your parents are going to appreciate the scandal," she said as she ran her hands up his chest and wrapped them around his neck.

"Then let's get out of here for a few hours," he said, taking her hand and pulling her down towards the foyer so that they could apparate out. "There's something I want to show you," he said before they were gone. Then they were standing in front of the structure Hermione had wanted to remodel for her trauma center. But it was no longer broken down and abandoned.

"What did you do?" she murmured, feeling her heart begin to pound fast. The building still looked as if it was being worked on, but the walls had been rebuilt and were in the process of getting painted.

"I know that you wanted to do this on your own, but I wanted to help too. It's not like I don't have the resources for it, so please don't be angry."

Hermione an unhappy face. "But you knew that I didn't want help!" she trailed off into a whine. "I wanted to succeed on my own and I had the money for it!" she said.

Draco wrapped his arms around her and placed his face against her neck. "Just let me do this for you. You can use that money for something else, like the advertisements and the galas you can hold for fundraising. Take this as an early birthday present."

"Draco," Hermione started in a chiding tone. But then his lips were on hers and her response died in her throat. She laughed against his kiss and he pulled away. "Sneaky bastard."

"Well, what can I say. At least I got you to stop talking," he said smugly. Hermione slapped him on the head. "Are you going to take my gift?" he asked as she turned around in his arms so that they could look at the building again.

"That all depends," she said before breaking free and walking slowly inside. The inside had been renovated as well, and some furniture had been placed in the exact place she had described to him a few weeks ago. "You remembered," she said before jumping into his arms and kissing him, almost toppling them both over.

"Is that a yes?" Draco asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. It looks wonderful. When will it be finished?"

"By the end of the month everything should be finished," he replied, walking her out and up a path at the back of the building.

"Where are we going?" Hermione asked him as her eyes settled on a huge lake she had only seen from afar.

"We're going for a little of peace before my parents seat us down like children and talk to us about scandals hurting our family name," he said, pointing to a small dock that was holding a rowboat next to it.

Hermione smirked. "You're going to row us out?"

"Are you crazy? What's magic for?" he asked her arrogantly as she rolled her eyes. "Come on." He got in first and then helped her settle in safely before he started to row them the first few minutes and when they were safely far away, used his wand so that the boat moved by itself.

"What are we going to do out here, all alone?" asked Hermione slyly.

Draco leaned towards her and brushed their lips gently before nearly tackling her. Hermione broke into peals of laughter as his hands moved over her sides and they settled into the long boat so that they could lie comfortably next to each other as he conjured up some pillows to make them comfortable. "You know," he started, as his hands worked on the buttons of her blouse. "My father has been asking me when we're going to give the family another heir."

Hermione tensed at the mention of a child. She shook her head and stared up at the sky, which had been looking cloudier by the minute. "I'm not ready for kids, Draco. They're just not on my priority list right now. Sure I'd love to have some of my own in the future, but not now."

Draco cursed inwardly. They needed one now in order to stay married, or at least one in the next few months that were left before their next anniversary. "Give it some thought, Hermione. I want to have children with you some time soon. I don't want to wait too long."

"You can't force this issue on me, Draco. And I just told you where I stand," she said impatiently.

Draco rolled his eyes and started to kiss a path down her exposed neck as his hands inched up her knee-length skirt. "Don't get angry," he whispered against her heated flesh.

As much as it annoyed her that he was trying to calm her down with sex, she wasn't about to stop him either. His hands slid through her and worked a moan from her throat as he continued to kiss and suck her chest. If he thought a spontaneous shag would work in getting her pregnant, he was wrong. But he didn't know that.

"What if the boat tips over?" she gasped as he pulled her above him and worked on his belt and fly.

"That's what magic is for, sweetheart," he said urgently, and she noticed that with every movement they made, the boat stayed in place and didn't sway.

"What if someone sees us?" she gasped as he guided her hips to his.

"We're too far out. Now one will see us unless they have some sort of magnifying contraption aimed directly at this spot," he ground out as she enclosed him completely.

"What if—"

He cut her off with an urgent kiss that left her gasping breathlessly as his hands moved her hips over his. She shivered in pleasure as one of his hands moved over her body and she felt the first drops of rain fall over her exposed skin. She gripped the sides of the boat as Draco guided them towards the pinnacle of satisfaction.

The rain didn't matter as it fell on them both and dampened their hair and clothes. Nothing

mattered but each other as Hermione watched Draco's face contort in pleasure. He really was a handsome man to behold. Even the faces he made were enough to push her over that brink, knowing that she was the one who was causing them, and it was amazing, as always. His movements were slow and hard, guiding her faster and faster as her release slammed into her.

As she came down from her high, her eyes settled on his face. She was moving of her own accord now, watching as his eyes slid closed and his lips parted to let out quick breaths. Then his fingers were digging into her hips and he was making noises low in his throat before she stopped moving all together and leaned forward so that she could lay on his chest.

"You know, I think we need to have that conversation on our greatest victory again," she said against his neck, enjoying the way he was shivering against her, though maybe it had something to do with the cold rain still falling on them.

"Give me a few minutes to get my brain working again," he admitted as he took his wand and waved it silently. A blue bubble appeared around them and the boat, stopping them from getting wet with the rain. Then with a simple drying spell they fixed their clothes but just laid there as the boat moved slowly from side to side.

Hermione smiled to herself and patted his chest. "You asked me long ago what my greatest victory was and I told you that I didn't have one. Now I do."

"And what's that?" Draco asked as he propped himself on an elbow and gazed down at her, eyes shining and his hair in disarray.

"Getting to know you. A man who spent so many years making me miserable. I know now that you're not so bad," she said quietly.

"So basically you're saying that marrying me was your greatest victory?" he asked, sounding smug.

Hermione made a face and felt like slapping him. He always knew how to twist things to serve his purposes. "I guess," she said mulishly, pouting slightly.

Draco pulled her into a gentle kiss. "You want to know my greatest victory now?"

She nodded.

"You. Having you in my arms, in my life, is my greatest victory," he said as the rain kept falling over the protective bubble and all around them.

Hermione smiled to herself. Maybe she should start rethinking her 'no kids' policy.

Lucius Malfoy had always been a man with a purpose.

Making money. Marrying a beautiful, pureblood woman. Having an heir. Making more money. Serving the dark lord. Protecting his family. Denouncing the dark lord. Restoring the family's good name. And now... making sure that there was another heir on the way.

If Draco didn't want to rush things along, then he would. Time was still ticking and the girl

showed no signs of being pregnant. Maybe Draco wasn't doing something right. He smirked to himself, imagining the look on his son's face if he ever mentioned that to him.

So as he strolled into the kitchen, he ignored the bow heads and surprised looks from the house elves working away, preparing dinner. He was trying to be inconspicuous, but he hadn't been inside of the kitchen more than twice in his entire life. He walked over to a table holding freshly made orange juice, his daughter-in-law's preferred juice. When he judged that none of the elves were looking, he poured five drops of a little flask in his hands into the liquid.

He turned to the elf nearest him. "Make sure that my son's wife has some of this juice today and tomorrow. Better yet, see that my son has some as well," he ordered.

"Yes, Master," the elf squeaked.

The only downside of that potion was that it made the person more fertile for the day it was taken. So she wouldn't be any more fertile tomorrow unless she had another glass. He just hoped he gave her the potion accurately on a day that his son and wife decided to shag each other, as tasteless as that sounded. He walked out of the kitchen feeling smug and didn't notice Narcissa step in through another door.

She smiled as she took in the scents, and though she had never stooped low enough to actually prepare something, she loved to see how the elves did everything and how the foods smelled when they came out of the oven or from the stove. She particularly enjoyed the smell of freshly made bread.

"Beryl, serve me a glass of that freshly made orange juice," she said lightly.

"Of course, Mistress! Would the Mistress like a piece of carrot cake?" the elf asked.

"Oh, all right," Narcissa replied, vaguely wondering when she would hear the pitter-patter of little feet again. She sipped delicately at her orange juice, unaware that she would probably get her wish, if not from Hermione and Draco, then from herself and her foolish husband.

How was that? I was giggling at this last bit that I wrote. Lucius is such a dummy, he doesn't even know what he's getting himself into. Okay, so I want to thank everyone for their reviews from the last chapter and once again I'm sorry for the typos and grammar errors. Don't worry, I'll get to them soon. I know this chapter was kind of immature, but hey, Daphne had it coming.

I would also like to thank those of you who answered my request for names for the trauma center. So take a moment and let me know which name you think would go best and then I'll let you guys know the next chapter!

Here is the list of the names that were provided by my great readers...

1) Thaumaturgic Creature Trauma Center and Clinic (Thaumaturgic is another word for bewitching) From: Pesche

2) St. Barnabus Clinic and Trauma Center From: Varietygirl9143

3) Nouveau Jour Trama Center and Clinic (Means New Day Trauma Center and Clinic) From: simply infatuated

4) Sacred Heart Trauma Center Public Clinic From: Inulover4eva

And my lame-o try...

5) The Blue Phoenix Trauma Center and Clinic for Magical Creatures

Thanks to those of you gave me your input and now I'm going to urge you all to vote and see which one of these would be best. Take care everyone and I hope to update soon!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 12: Better to Have Loved Once

And the winner is..... Inulover4eva! Congrats. Even though my suggestion beat out the others, it wouldn't be fair for the people who gave suggestions for me to end up using my own. So the next suggestion with the most votes was Inu's, though I did tweak the title a little. I didn't know that the name came from Scrubs, sorry. I'm a huge Grey's Anatomy fan, so I don't watch any others. To everyone else who gave a suggestion, thank you and sorry that you didn't win, but you all get special Draco-shaped cookies for participating!

I gave and gave the best of me

But couldn't give you what you need

Curses. Lucius eyed his daughter-in-law from behind his paper. She didn't look at all pregnant. He'd been spiking her juice with fertility potion and had even given his son some of it as well for the past two months, but there was no sign of the morning sickness or growing stomach that usually accompanied gestation.

"Where is my mother?" Draco asked his father as they sat, sharing breakfast on a Saturday morning. He was curious because for the past few years, she had never missed a breakfast with her family.

Lucius shrugged. "Are you going to drink that juice?" he asked Hermione.

She shook her head. "I discovered that orange juice has too much sugar for me. It makes me hyper if I drink it during the week and I exhaust myself more while I'm on the job. All I'm drinking now is a cup of coffee in the mornings," she replied.

"But it's the weekend," Lucius stressed.

Hermione gave him a suspicious look. "I am aware of that. But I'm not in the mood for juice," she said as politely as she could manage. She and Lucius stared each other down with Draco

looking from one to the other, wondering what was going on, before Narcissa walked towards the table, pale faced and looking sick.

"Lucius," she said softly.

"Yes?" he asked absently, looking up at her.

"I'm pregnant," she managed to say before she broke into sobs.

"What?!" Lucius nearly screamed, almost jumping out of his chair, Draco following.

Hermione's eyes were wide in shock. A baby at Narcissa's age? Well, she wasn't that old, but still, by the time the kid was twenty, they would be in their sixties. The blonde woman looked distressed, so completely at odds with her usually cold demeanor, and Lucius and Draco's attitudes weren't helping. "Are you completely sure?" Hermione asked her.

Narcissa dabbed at her eyes with a cloth napkin and nodded. "I brewed the potion myself yesterday and I took it this morning. I almost fainted when it came out positive. I took it twice to make sure," she said in a small voice.

The brunette patted her hand and glared at the two men. "She needs your support, not more doubts and fears than what she is already feeling," she said darkly.

Lucius looked at his wife, shock still clear on his face. "We're really expecting another child?" he asked her. Narcissa nodded and her eyes watered again as he knelt next to her and took her hands in his. "We're still young," he murmured in reassurance. Narcissa wrapped her arms around him, forgetting that they were in the presence of her son and his wife. Hermione stood from her seat and pulled Draco along so that they could leave his parents in peace.

"You're almost twenty-three and you're just now going to have a baby brother or sister," Hermione said with a giggle.

Draco scowled. "Can we not talk about that? I've had enough embarrassment for today." He wrapped an arm around her shoulders and kissed her cheek. "What are we going to do today?"

"You and I aren't doing anything," she said with a smirk. "Pansy and I are going to Paris for some shopping."

"To Paris? Why wasn't I made aware of this?" Draco asked as he wrapped his arms around her.

Hermione kissed his chin. "Because we're only going for a few hours. We're taking a portkey in an hour and we'll be back before dinner. Do you need me to get you something there?" Draco shook his head before leaning in for a kiss that took her breath away. Then he let her go and walked off towards their room.

She floo'd to Pansy's home and was instructed to wait in the sitting room for the mistress of the house by a little haughty elf that didn't even bother to ask if she wanted anything. A few minutes later, Pansy walked into the room, a smile on her face. "Are you ready to go? The portkey can be activated now if you'd like. It's here in the hallway table."

Hermione stood and nodded. "We should hurry. I want to be back before dinner," she said as

she followed Pansy. "You have a beautiful home, by the way."

"Thank you; my mother decorated it herself, but since her death I haven't had the heart to change anything."

The brunette mentally kicked herself. Me and my big mouth, she thought. Then her eyes flew wide and she let out a shriek when she ran into a half-naked Harry Potter, who had appeared to be looking for Pansy. He was wearing only plaid boxers and his hair was a complete mess. "My eyes!" Hermione yelled, covering her eyes with her hands.

"Mione! What are you doing here?! Pans, why didn't you tell me she was going to be here?" Harry yelled, conjuring a robe to cover himself.

Pansy sighed in irritation. "I told you not to come down here until ten minutes had passed, but as always, you don't listen. You can look now Hermione, he's decent."

Hermione glared at them both. "Why didn't either of you tell me that you were together? You had ample opportunities!"

"We just didn't think it was the best time to do it. Please don't be mad," Harry pleaded.

His friend stared at him in disbelief. "This has been going on for months and you didn't trust me enough to tell me," Hermione said, shaking her head sadly. "I was honest about my situation, Harry. Why couldn't you be the same about yours?"

"Mione, please," said Harry again.

Pansy looked remorseful. "Don't get mad at him; it's my fault. I wanted you and I to be friends before we told you about us. Please don't be too angry at Harry?"

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'm not so much angry. I'm just really disappointed in you both. You Harry, because you cheated on Ginny and you weren't honest with me, and you Pansy because I really wanted us to be good friends. But if you start lying from the get-go, maybe I should rethink being your friend," Hermione said, moving towards the hearth where the floo was.

"Come on! Don't be this way, Mione!"

"Don't Mione me, Potter. I'm mad as hell right now," Hermione snapped before leaving them there.

Pansy sighed and wrapped her arms around Harry's neck. "We need to give her time. You're like her brother and we kept something big from her. Of course she would've been mad," she said.

Harry nodded and wrapped his arms around her. Being with Pansy had been so different than what he'd had with Ginny. Pansy was smart, outspoken, sly, funny, and carefree. Ginny had been all those as well, but their tempers had clashed horribly and had been the main reason why everything had fallen apart. But he had this girl now, and he wanted to make things work with her.

Pansy kissed his cheek and smiled. "Don't worry. Hermione won't stay mad at you for long."

You're too cute when you pout like that."

Harry chuckled and kissed her. He highly doubted that a pout would work with Hermione.

"You'll spend the day with me? We haven't gone out since your trauma center opened months ago," said Draco as he and Hermione stepped into his study after breakfast.

Her poor hubby was feeling neglected. Hermione smirked and was about to ask him what he had in mind when there was a hoot from the window and she looked up to see an owl swoop in and land on the desk in front of her, holding out a letter for her. She took it and read as the owl left, and a smile curled at her lips. "If you'll wait about an hour, I'll spend the rest of the day with you. I have to go to the trauma center right now," she said.

"Why? Is something wrong?" Draco asked as she summoned her purse and walked towards the floo.

"Nothing is wrong. Neville just wrote to me saying that they just got a batch of confiscated dragon eggs from a man who stole them from Romania last week. Charlie Weasley just arrived to pick them up and I want to say hello to him before he leaves again."

"Why don't I just go with you?" Draco asked, giving her a suspicious look.

Hermione stopped to look at him and grinned. "Are you jealous that I'm going to see Charlie?"

He glared at her. "I didn't know I had to worry about more than one Weasley," he said in a tone that betrayed the relaxed pose he was in, leaning casually against the doorframe.

Hermione frowned and stared at him in the eye. "You haven't had to worry about Ron for a while now. Why are you bringing this up now? Have I given you any reason at all to make you think that Ron—or any other man—is a threat to you?" she asked him in a low tone.

Draco shook his head, his grey eyes looking away from the incredulous look on her face, the disbelief in her eyes. "Look, I didn't mean to say that. It was stupid. Let's just go and forget about it, okay?" he asked impatiently.

For the sake of her own patience, she nodded and let it die. The last thing she wanted was to have a row with Draco over something so insignificant. But she knew that this wasn't the end of their discussion. It was something that was obviously bothering him, especially with their second anniversary coming up and the fact that she had refused to get pregnant. Once again she reassured herself that if there was no love, then there would be no baby. Even if that meant the end of their peaceful marriage in just a few months.

When she stepped through the floo, she was standing in the main lobby of Sacred Heart Trauma Center and Clinic for Magical Creatures, which had opened months ago and had been suggested by Neville Longbottom himself. Hermione had loved the name and had gone with his suggestion because Neville had been so much help to her the past few years and had even left his job at the ministry to come and work with her at the trauma center. The information desk was in front of her, and behind it was a long hallway that moved towards the private offices of the animal healers, and her own office as director and top researcher. She and Neville worked with a team of ten specialized healers, three researches, and four people involved in the creation of

healing potions and spells specific for magical creatures of all types.

She loved working with the healers, but was now taking over the department of the creation of potions. A few days ago they department at the Ministry had brought in a hippogriff that had been badly hurt and had been kept in inhuman conditions. They had healed it and cared for it and had brought it back from the brink of death after it appeared that it would not survive. The creature now grazed in the field behind the trauma center and only left for a few hours at a time before returning. Hermione had taken an instant liking to it and sometimes went out on her breaks to just sit with it for a few minutes. She smiled, thinking of Buckbeak and Harry.

To her left was the section of the trauma center for the most dangerous creatures and to her right were the rooms for the more normal and less life threatening animals. So far the setbacks had been minimal, and she was so proud of what she and the rest of the people who had helped her with this had accomplished. Neville had been one of the best supports for her and she would be forever grateful to him for sticking by her side. He now had his very own office and was a researcher with her.

"Come on," Hermione said, not even reacting when Draco took her hand in his and walked with her down the hallway. Saturday's and Sunday's were slow, so they would close earlier than other days and would be on call in case any emergencies came up. They entered one of the smallest treatment rooms and were greeted by Neville, Charlie, and Ron.

"Hermione!" Charlie said happily, engulfing her in a hug and nearly tearing her away from Draco. "I haven't seen you in ages!"

"How are you?" Hermione asked once he put her down.

"I'm great. Just here to take these babies back to their mothers. They've been particularly more violent without their eggs, so I can't stay too long," Charlie said, pointing towards a large crate filled with straw and holding four large eggs.

Neville grinned and pointed at one. "You can feel the baby moving inside, kinda feels like Parv's belly, only harder."

Hermione laughed and turned to Ron. "Hey," she said quietly.

Ron returned the smile and took a step over to hug her tightly. "Hey, Mione. Glad to see that you're okay and that you've done something so amazing here. Congrats."

She gave him a wide smile, feeling such a feeling of elation that she almost turned to Draco and told him that they should go make that baby he wanted now, but she refrained. Having Ron back as a friend was no reason for her to go and make rash decisions. Her happiness was cut short when she saw Ron and Draco were glaring at each other. Hermione cleared her throat and turned to Charlie. "When will you be coming back? Maybe we can all have dinner that day," she said as he secured the eggs and covered the crate with a blanket.

"I'm coming back for a few days next week. There's a girl that I want my family to meet," he whispered conspiratorially.

"Wow, it must be serious if you're bringing her home to your mum," Hermione stated.

"It is. She's wonderful, Hermione, and it would be great if you're there too," Charlie said before picking up his precious cargo and moving towards the apparition point.

"I will be, just let me know when it's going to be. Well, I hope the return of these babies go without a problem," Hermione said as she walked with Charlie.

He nodded and looked at her. "It's strange to see you and my brother with different people. Are you happy with that guy, Hermione?"

She nodded and was not aware that Ron was behind them. "I am, Charlie. He's not so bad once you get to know him," she replied.

"Well, that's good for you, I guess," he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Thanks," she said flatly. "Take care of yourself, Charlie."

"I will," he replied, turning to his brother. "Take care little bro, and give Lavender and the baby my love," he said before apparating.

She turned to Ron and smiled slightly. "So, how is Lavender doing with her pregnancy?"

Ron smiled. "She's moody and has some strange cravings. The other day she asked me to get her rocky-road ice cream with pickles. The smell was absolutely foul, but she wanted me to sit with her through the entire thing," he said, looking faintly green.

Hermione smothered a laugh and patted his shoulder. "My condolences. At least she didn't have you taste it with her. Do you know the baby's sex yet?"

He beamed and nodded. "We're having a boy!" he said in a voice so proud and happy that she couldn't help but hug him tightly. Her heart soared when he gave her a squeeze, but not the way it would've done months ago. She just knew that things between her and Ron would really be okay. She closed her eyes for just a moment, but when she opened them, she was met with Draco's stormy gray ones.

There was a strange expression on his face that worried her, that made her move away from Ron quickly. It was a mix of hostility and disappointment. "We should get going," she said lightly. She turned to Neville. "I'll see you on Monday. Take it easy because we're working nonstop all morning," she said.

Neville gave her a weary look. "Okay. I need the work to clear my mind from Parvati's mood swings. See you, Hermione," he said before taking the floo. He had come in on a Saturday to take care of the eggs while Charlie came to pick them up. Being that they were researchers and she was the main person in charge, she and Neville didn't work weekends, or at least they didn't have to unless they fell behind with something.

"I have to go too," Ron said, giving Hermione's shoulder before leaving as well.

Hermione turned to Draco and cleared her throat. "Where did you want us to go?"

Draco shook his head. "I don't feel like going anywhere anymore," he said, grabbing some floo powder and going to the Manor. Hermione stood there for a few seconds, frowning and

wondering what the hell Draco's problem was now. She followed him and caught up to him as he walked into his study.

She shut the door behind her and turned to him. "What in the world is wrong with you?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean," he replied, taking out a book from a shelf behind the desk.

Hermione slammed her purse against the desk, her temper flaring. "Don't act like you don't know what I'm talking about. This morning you made that comment about Ron and now you're being cold and distant with me. Why? Is it because I hugged him? I did that because he found out he's having a son with Lavender. I was sharing his happiness!" She almost jumped when he slammed the book closed and glared at her.

"Tell me something," Draco snapped as he moved to stand in front of her. "What do you feel for the Weasel now? And feel free to answer truthfully."

Her cheeks reddened in anger. "Don't call him that. We're not in school anymore, so do us bother a favor and grow up."

"You're not answering my question. Are you buying yourself time because you don't know what to tell me?"

Hermione felt as if he had decked her. She was having trouble taking in a normal breath because of all of the anger and shock rolling around inside her. "Ron is my friend. Nothing more. Why are you acting this way?" she asked. Her eyes were glassy with pent up tears of frustration and fury, but she would be damned if she ever cried in front of him again. It was ridiculous that they were having this conversation now, after so many months of peace.

Draco scowled and moved to his desk, bringing out a picture from a drawer. He handed it over and gauged her reaction. Hermione stared at the only picture she had kept of her and Ron. Frankly, she had forgotten all about it. "Where did you get this?" she murmured, staring at her and Ron's happy faces. She remembered looking at it once before she and Draco had gone to Venice, but then she had lost track of it.

"One of the elves found it while cleaning your old bedroom. Were you hiding it there so that I wouldn't find it?"

Hermione let out a slow breath. "You think that lowly of me? After everything you did to me, I gave you a chance to show me that our marriage wasn't a total loss, and you question me about an old picture I didn't even remember? You've got some nerve," she spat.

Draco sneered. "Do you still love him?"

She glared at him. "Yes," she replied, noticing the way his eyes flinched but his face remained impassive. "But as a friend."

He looked away from her, not wanting to see her reaction or her expression when he asked her his next question. "What do you feel for me?"

Hermione stared at his back as he gazed out the window. "I don't hate you anymore," she

started. "I can't hate you anymore because you've shown me that there's a good man under that sneer and constant smirk. You've become an important part of my life," she said.

But you don't love me, he thought, feeling a miserable ache in his gut. No, not in his gut, in his heart. They'd been together for many months now, and still she refused to let him into her heart. Maybe it was for the best that their fake marriage would be over in just a matter of months. Maybe she already knew about the clause and she didn't want to get attached. He swallowed hard and turned to look at her. "Do you love me?" Draco asked before he lost his nerve. Inwardly he prayed that she said yes, but he was disappointed at her next words.

"I don't think we should talk about that now," Hermione replied.

"What? Why not?" he snapped.

"I'm not ready to answer that question," she said.

"Bullshit," he snarled.

Hermione bristled. "Why don't you answer that question yourself? Do you love me, Draco?" she asked angrily.

He stared at her for a moment, not answering. Hermione shook her head and sighed heavily. "How do you expect me to answer that question when you can't even answer it yourself? I should go. I don't want either of us to say things we'll later regret," she said before leaving him standing there, feeling guilty and angry at the same time.

After that little episode, they made up, but Hermione still felt that rift between them. She often caught him looking at her somberly, or even sadly, and wondered what was on his mind. What he wanted her to say. Did she love him? Maybe, but she sure as hell was not going to admit it first. He would have to take the first step. There were times when she wanted to believe that he was worried that they would be automatically divorced in just a few months, but Draco acted as if nothing was amiss. He hadn't even approached her to tell her about the clause in the pre-nup. He had taken to being cold and distant, especially when she sometimes talked about Harry or Ron. Speaking of Ron, his son had been born just a few weeks before. He and Lavender had named him Roan, which ironically mean "little red," and he had the same Weasley red hair and freckles. Hermione had never seen a baby with bluer eyes. She just hoped Lavender hadn't thrown away the gift she had sent the baby.

Up next was her mother-in-law. Her stomach had grown quite large and would pop any day now. Lucius tried to look calm and collected, but Hermione could tell that the prospect of being a father again, of starting over with a tiny life to look after and to mold into a good person was getting to him. He hadn't really been a good father to Draco as he had been growing up. This was his chance for absolution.

Hermione remembered she had caught him talking to himself while he drank his expensive firewhiskey. Draco also looked freaked out about having a baby sibling at his age, but he hid it well when in front of his overly emotional and hormonal mother. Who by the way was expecting a girl, but only both women knew. Hermione sometimes found herself giggling at the thought of Lucius reacting to being a father of a girl. She was almost sure that he would probably faint when it came time to buy all pink and yellow dresses and pretty dolls.

She sighed heavily as she and Neville worked at finding the proper ingredients for a healing potion made for the resistant scales of reptilian creatures. "So, how are Parvati and the baby doing?" she asked her friend.

Neville smiled proudly. "They're great, but Frankie has taken to waking up in the middle of the night and not going to sleep for two or three hours. Parv is really tired and I try to help, but she won't let me because she knows that I have to come to work early."

"When was the last time you had a vacation?" Hermione asked him.

He shrugged. "Two years, maybe?"

Hermione frowned and looked into their boiling cauldron. "Then the next time I go on vacation, so do you," she said. Before Neville could reply, an owl arrived with a letter for Hermione. She took it and read, a smile on her face. "My mother-in-law went into labor this morning and is now the proud mother of a baby girl," she said with a grin, standing from her desk. "Take the rest of the day off, Nev. I'm not coming back and the potion is finished. It just needs to sit for an entire day."

"Thanks, Hermione, and congratulate Mrs. Malfoy for me," he said as they both grabbed their things and walked out the door.

Draco stared down into the small, red face of his baby sister and smiled. Lucius had passed out when the healer had told him that he was the father of a new baby girl. Draco couldn't tell who she looked like, but she did have the trademark Malfoy pale hair. He turned to his mother when she called his name. "How are you feeling, mum?" he asked, taking her hand and pressing a kiss to her knuckles.

"A little sore, but I'm fine. Where is Lucius?" she asked.

Draco smirked. "I think he's placing the birth announcement in the Prophet."

Narcissa shook her head and smiled. "Where is Hermione?"

He shrugged. "I sent her an owl a while ago. She should be here soon."

His mother eyed him carefully. "Is something going on between you two? I've noticed that you both seem distant from each other. Almost strained. Are you having problems?" she asked as he pulled a chair over and sat next to her.

"I don't think things are working out. We had an argument a few months ago that changed things between us, and we haven't been the same since," he said, running a hand through his short hair.

Narcissa looked at her son and felt something tug at her heart. This was her baby boy; no matter that he was a grown man and married, or that she had a new baby to worry about now. She wanted his happiness more than anything. "You've talked to her about it?" she asked him. Draco shook his head. "Then you should, foolish boy. If you love her at all, you will make things right and not wait for this to drive you both further apart," Narcissa said wisely. "Do you love

her?"

Draco hesitated and was not aware of the eavesdropper by the door. Hermione held her breath and waited for his response, but she didn't hear it because Lucius suddenly appeared at her side, making her jump and push the door open. She cleared her throat and Lucius gave her a sly look that told her that he knew she had been eavesdropping. She just smiled and walked over to look at the baby.

"Oh, she's beautiful! May I carry her?" she asked. Narcissa nodded and motioned Lucius over. "What did you name her?"

"Darlene," Narcissa said with a smile. "Her name is Darlene Malfoy."

Draco watched Hermione handle the baby carefully and felt a small smile tug at his lips. She looked beautiful with an infant in her arms. He had no doubt that she would make a great mother. He just wished desperately that she would become the mother of his children. He stepped towards her and gave her an intense look. "There are many things that we need to talk about," he said softly, eyeing the baby.

Hermione nodded and gave him a solemn look. "I know. We can go out tonight if you'd like."

He shook his head. "Fix things at the trauma center. I want us to go on a trip for our second anniversary. You should take off two weeks because we'll be going to Rome."

"Okay, I'll see if I can get the two weeks. I need to find someone to be in charge while I'm gone, and I've told Neville he can go on vacation next time I did, so he's out."

"Fine. Just do what you need to do," Draco said before placing a kiss on her cheek. "I have to go back to the office. I'll see you at home?" he asked her. She nodded and smiled slightly. He said his goodbyes to his parents and then left.

"You know about the pre-nup clause already, don't you?" Lucius asked as he walked over to take the baby from her.

Hermione looked back at Narcissa and noticed that she was asleep. She nodded. "I've known for a long time."

"Then you know that you have only three months to conceive and then you will be divorced. What are you waiting for?" he asked her, rocking the girl gently. When Hermione didn't reply, he sighed in annoyance. "Unless you're waiting for the end of the marriage so that you can keep the money."

Hermione looked outraged. "Even if we do end up going our separate ways, I will not take his money. You should know by now that money matters very little to me. Congratulations on the birth of your daughter, but I must go," she said before walking out of the room, feeling tears burn her eyes.

Hermione stood out on the wide terrace of the villa his family owned in Rome. The view was beautiful and the weather was perfect. There was a small breeze blowing at the long tresses of her hair and ruffling the hem of her white sundress. She was tired of her situation with Draco.

Nothing had changed in the last few months except the fact that he hadn't been so cold towards her as before. But she couldn't help but feel sad that in two weeks they would no longer be a married couple.

There was no way of knowing what Draco felt for her because they didn't speak about it. There were times when the look in his eyes made her think that maybe he did love her, but he never said the words. Neither did she, anyway. Though she felt it in her heart that maybe she had fallen in love with him, there was no way she would admit it now, at the end of everything.

The breeze carried his scent over and Hermione turned to look at Draco as he stood by the door, his eyes on her. She knew so much about him now. The way he thought, his ideals, his dreams, his voice, his scent. She sighed and pushed her hair away from her face as he approached her slowly. As her lips parted to say something to break the silence, he cupped her face and brought his lips to hers. He kissed her deep and slow, tasting her until they pulled away for a much needed breath. His hands were in her hair, fingers grasping the silky curls and holding her close to him.

"We're here. What did you want us to talk about?" she asked softly.

"Of the fact that we only have two weeks left of our marriage," Draco said in much the same tone. He wasn't at all shocked when she showed no surprise.

"Do you want our marriage to end?" she asked sadly.

"Of course not. But there's not much we can do except conceiving a child, but I know you don't want that. All that is left is for us to live these next two weeks in peace and try to make the most of it," he said quietly.

Hermione felt her eyes sting with tears. She could admit that she didn't want to get a divorce from him, not now, but her heart and mind were one in her decision. She would not bring a child into a loveless marriage and if she and Draco ended in an unwanted divorce, well then so be it. "Is there nothing we can do aside from having a child?" she asked as they turned to look at the beautiful view, his arms still around her.

Draco shook his head. "Generations of Malfoy's have gone through the same stipulation in their marriage, and every generation has produced an heir in the first two years of marriage, be it male or female. My ancestors didn't care much about love. The most important thing was always preserving the Malfoy bloodline and last name," he said, kissing her neck.

Hermione sighed heavily and turned to look at Draco again. "Why don't we just forget about all this for these next few days and just enjoy the time we have left in our marriage."

"Do you want us to get a divorce?" he asked her honestly.

She shook her head and rubbed his biceps. "No. I think that we still have so much to learn from each other. Two years haven't been enough and I don't want things to end like this."

Draco smiled and nodded. "I share the same thoughts. If we can't stop our annulment, would you be interested in still seeing me?"

Hermione laughed and nodded. "You'll be my boyfriend after you were my husband?"

"Why not?" Draco asked with a smirk.

"I like the sound of that," she said, pulling him along and back into the beautiful house. We'll make it work somehow. As long as we both don't want this to end.

Every time he thought of their marriage ending, Draco's heart felt as if it was being twisted in his chest by a red-hot poker. But he knew that most of blame for the end of the marriage would be on Hermione. She had refused to have his child and it spoke volumes of the fact that she didn't want to be tied to him for the rest of her life. He watched her as she slept soundly next to him.

In thirty minutes, their marriage would cease to be and she would be free from him. It hurt; he wasn't about to say that it didn't, but he had to suck it up and admit defeat. Hermione didn't love him, so therefore it was best that things ended this way. Draco just didn't know how long it would take him to get back to normal. How long it would take him to get used to sleeping alone again, of not seeing her everyday, of not touching her whenever he wanted. Sure, she had said that she didn't want things to end, but she hadn't even thought about bending her will a little so that they could've had a child.

He got out of bed and walked out to get himself a glass of wine. He needed it before waking her up to have her as his wife for the very last time. He was unaware of the soft brown eyes watching him as he left. Hermione let out a deep breath and ran a hand through her hair. The past two weeks had been wonderful, and she feared that they had made her fall even more in love with Draco. She slammed a hand against the mattress and sat up. This had been her exact fear when she had given him a chance. She hadn't wanted to fall in love with him and not be reciprocated.

Even though he had said he would be with her, even after the divorce, Hermione had doubts. So many doubts. Her eyes moved to Draco as he walked in, a glass of wine in his hand. He sat next to her and offered the glass to her. Hermione took it and drained nearly half the glass.

"In thirty minutes you'll be Hermione Granger again," he said.

She nodded and sighed heavily. "But I want to fall asleep as Hermione Malfoy." She kissed him then, tasting the wine on his lips and gliding her hands down the body she had come to know as well as her own. His movements were gentle and slow, making her arch her back at his touch, at his kiss. It felt as if he were saying goodbye to her; Hermione didn't understand why.

As his body strained against hers, pushing them both up towards that pinnacle, Hermione had to close her eyes to keep Draco from seeing the tears standing in them. She didn't want this night to be over, but it would be, and soon. He whispered her name as she clenched around him, a low moan torn from her throat. And it was all he needed to find his own release, her name passing his lips over and over as he kissed her neck, her jaw, her cheek, and finally her lips.

They weren't even aware that she was now Hermione Granger again and that their marriage was over.

When her eyes opened to the sunlight, Hermione flinched and tried to draw the sheets over her head, but that was when she noticed that Draco was not at her side. She sat up slowly and looked around, finding that he was nowhere in sight. She walked towards the bathroom to take a quick shower and dress, before she walked out of the room to search for him.

She found him sitting outside in the terrace, under a huge umbrella and with a coffee in his hand. "Hey," she whispered, sitting in front of him.

"Did you sleep well?" he asked in a monotone.

Hermione nodded and frowned, feeling a strange air about him. "Are you okay?"

Draco shook his head and cleared his throat. "I've been thinking, and those thoughts haven't sat well with me, but I had to. Hermione, I think..... I think it's best that we leave things the way they are."

She gave him a confused look. "I'm not following."

He sighed. "I just... thought about this whole situation, from the very start. You deserve someone better than me. Someone who didn't blackmail you into marriage. Someone you don't love. You need someone who will make you happy, and I obviously wasn't that person. You didn't want a child to tie you to me, or anything else for that matter. So, I'm saying, it's best we leave things the way they are. You get half of my inheritance and you'll be set for life. You won't have to worry about anything ever again," he said, standing.

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. Only two weeks ago he had agreed to not let things die! What the hell was wrong with him now? "Why are you doing this?" she asked, her voice cracking as she stood and followed him.

He wouldn't face her as he said his next words. "I'm letting you go. You're free from me, Hermione. You vowed from the beginning to never feel more for me than hate, and your feelings may have changed, but there's no love, and you deserve better than me. I hope you find someone to make you truly happy, and I'm sorry I ruined your life—and Weasel's—by forcing you to marry me. You can take as long as you'd like to move out of the Manor," Draco said before walking away from her.

The tears that had been standing in her eyes for the past two weeks fell as she watched him go, not believing what he had just done to her. He had just... given up. A sob caught in her throat and she had to sit down and place her head between her knees to try to get her breathing to normal again.

She sat there for what seemed like hours but was only minutes before she stood and walked to the bedroom to get her things. If he wanted her out of his life, she wouldn't argue with it. She wouldn't even fight him, or ask him to reconsider. She had known marrying Draco Malfoy had been the worst thing that would ever happen to her.

Slowly her sadness was turning her love for him cold. When the bastard came to his senses—and he would—it would be too late.

Don't kill me! (Hides inside a bomb shelter) I know that this was all so sudden, but guys I have had this story planned since I started writing it and this is how it goes. You'll also want to know that I have finished my outline and I know exactly what's going to happen from now on and how things will end. There will be twenty or twenty-one chapters to this story, depending on whether I can fit everything I have for each chapter, and I'm sorry if it's getting too dramatic and soap-operaish. Thanks again to everyone who reviewed the last chapter, I think we almost reached 100 reviews for that chapter.

Can anyone guess what's next? You'll all love it!

Thanks again and I hope I don't get too flamed after this chapter. Besides my peeps, this is by far the longest chapter I have written. Take care everyone and don't cry for Draco and Mione yet.

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 13: Brothers

You walked away, you stole my life

Just to find what you're looking for

Regardless of what Draco had said about taking all the time she needed to move out of the Manor, Hermione didn't take it. After she had packed her things at the villa in Rome, she had taken a portkey back to the Manor, arriving at around evening. She immediately started to pack her things there, leaving behind the jewelry and anything excessively expensive. She also took the time to leave things he had given her, except for the medallion. She would keep it because it had become a part of her that she rarely took off. Draco had yet to arrive and Hermione assumed he wouldn't be coming to the Manor at all tonight. She was in the middle of shrinking her suitcases so that she could place them inside her bag when Narcissa stepped into the room, Darlene in her arms. "What are you doing?" she asked.

Hermione turned to her ex-mother-in-law. "I'm packing my things. Your son and I are no longer married," she said stiffly.

Narcissa walked over to stand next to her, and Hermione smiled at the baby. She was the cutest thing with pale blonde hair, blue-gray eyes, and chubby cheeks. Though she never would've named a baby of hers Darlene, it suited this little one. She was purity in a one dark and dangerous family. "You decided not to have a child?" Narcissa asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I didn't want to bring a child into a loveless marriage, but I didn't want things to end either. I guess your son had other plans," she said, hating the way her voice broke. "We ended things completely. Well, he ended it, I just stood there like an idiot and listened. But in short, he doesn't want us to continue this because he couldn't make me happy and because he's not good enough for me. Those were his words, by the way."

The blonde made a noise of disbelief. "Draco has to be the most foolish man I have ever

known," she said darkly. "But you can't believe those things! Draco loves you."

The other woman gave a bitter laugh as she shrank another suitcase. "No he doesn't. If he loved me, he would've stayed with me to make things work. But he decided to let it all go down the drain. I'm fine with that," she lied. "There's no use fighting for what you never had," she said quietly.

Narcissa laid a hand on her shoulder. "He'll come around, Hermione. You were the best thing to ever happen to my son. You made him grow up; you made him realize that he couldn't keep thinking about himself only."

"That's not true," Hermione said angrily, forgetting that she was playing the part of nonchalance with the current situation. "He was only thinking about himself when he pushed me out of his life. He couldn't even stop to consider how this would affect me because I didn't want things to be over!"

Narcissa felt her heart go out to the poor girl who so very obviously had fallen in love with her idiot son. With her free hand she took the baby's blanket and used it to clean away Hermione's tears. "Do you love him?" she asked.

"No," Hermione replied vehemently. They both knew it was a lie.

"Well, at least stay the night. You have nowhere to go and I don't want you out there at this hour," said Narcissa as she changed the baby to her other arm. And maybe Draco would come home and fix things between them.

Hermione nodded. "Okay, but if you don't mind I'd like to stay in the room I first used when I came here."

"Of course," Narcissa said with a small smile. "Would you like to have dinner in your room?"

The brunette nodded and managed to return the smile. "Thank you for being here with me, and I'm sorry things didn't work out. You've been a great friend to me and I will be forever grateful," Hermione said as she finished the last of her things.

Narcissa sighed. "You're a wonderful woman, Hermione. Never forget that. You are smart and beautiful and my son is a fool for letting you go so easily."

Hermione sniffed and nodded. "Thank you," she said before Narcissa walked away and Hermione walked into her old room. This would be the last time she slept in the Manor and the last time she would step into what she had come to consider her home. Now to find a new place to live in. She supposed she could stay at a hotel starting tomorrow while she looked for a flat. She couldn't go to her mother's; she didn't want to worry her and tell her that she was divorced just yet.

Hermione sighed heavily. She would have to suck it up and turn to Harry, even though she was still a bit peeved at him. Now that she was alone, she could cry in peace. From her pocket she produced a photograph and felt a sense of déjà vu. She remembered so well looking at the picture of her and Ron many months ago. But the image she held in her hands was of her and Draco. This one had been taken during their vacation in Rome by a wizard photographer who had recognized them. Draco had stopped her in the middle of a huge garden and had kissed

her. The wind had blown off the hat she had been wearing right off her head and both she and Draco had ignored it as he wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her again. She crammed the picture back in her pocket and lay down on the soft bed, her body wracking with quiet sobs. Tomorrow would be a new day and she would get over this. She would move on. She would show Draco that she didn't need him.

In the morning she didn't even bother with breakfast and just had a coffee and some croissants before taking her purse and making her way towards the entrance hall. Lucius and Narcissa were there waiting for her. Hermione shook Lucius' hand and hugged Narcissa in goodbye. "When Draco gets back, please tell him that I don't want his money. Not one knut. I've always taken care of myself and I don't need anything from him now," she said quietly.

"Legally, the money is yours," said someone from behind her.

Hermione turned and felt her heart break all over again. He looked as bad as she did, but he handled it better. It appeared to her that he had just arrived from Rome. "I don't want anything from you," she almost spat, still very conscious that they were not alone.

His eyebrows forked. "Do what you want with the money, it's yours," he said, turning to go.

Hermione bit her trembling lip and asked him the question that had been on her mind the entire night, keeping her wide awake. "Did this whole year we spent together mean nothing to you?"

Draco froze. His breath came out long and tired. "No, it wasn't 'nothing,' but we clearly want different things. I forced you to marry me. I made you unhappy. Live your life the way you wanted to from the start. There's nothing holding you back."

"Well, it's too late for that. Ron is already married," she said coldly; she saw his back tense.

"Then try your luck with another Weasley, maybe you'll find your dream man there," he said before walking away from her.

Hermione swallowed hard and pushed down the urge to throw something at the back of Draco's head. She gave Lucius and Narcissa a final look. "Thank you for everything," she said before apparating away.

Lucius sighed heavily. "I guess the bottle of special wine I sent them on their vacation didn't work," he said in annoyance, leaving Narcissa alone before she had the chance to ask any questions.

Hermione arrived behind Harry's building and checked to see if she hadn't alerted any muggles before she walked towards the front. Harry and three other families lived in two-story flats in a very nice and peaceful neighborhood. She stood there for a long moment, gathering her thoughts and trying to swallow back her tears. Her mind was roiling with confusion and resentment because of her encounter with Draco. What was she going to tell Harry? How would he react? "Hermione?"

She looked up and noticed that Harry was standing in front of her, wearing baggy pajama pants and a t-shirt. "How did you know I was here?" she asked, aware that her nose was red and that her eyes were tearing up.

He smiled slightly. "I have wards that go off when friends or strangers approach this place," he said, noticing the look on her face. "Are you okay?"

Hermione shook her head. "Can I come in?"

Harry nodded and moved aside, shutting the door behind them. "Did Malfoy do something to you? Tell me, Mione. I'll kick the daylights out of him."

She shook her head but couldn't say the words she wanted to and she could tell Harry was getting worried. "It's over!" she finally gasped out, her breath coming so fast she was almost hyperventilating.

"What?" Harry asked before she threw herself into his arms.

"We're divorced!" she cried, her tears wetting his t-shirt at the shoulder.

"Hermione, I'm sorry but you're not making much sense. Did you say you're divorced?" he asked, patting her back gently. Hermione nodded but kept crying. "Please calm down. Can I get you a glass of water? Firewhiskey?" he had meant it as a joke.

She let out a half-laugh, half-sob. "Firewhiskey, please."

Harry knew things were bad if Hermione had accepted an alcoholic drink and at nine in the morning to boot. He quickly poured a glass and handed it to her as she sat on his couch. She gulped it down in one swallow before he was able to tell her not to do exactly that. She ended up coughing and gagging as the liquid burned down her throat. He always bought the strongest kind of alcohol. He smacked her on the back a few times. "Now, can we try again, please?"

She nodded and sighed, rubbing away the tears at the corner of her eyes. "I'm divorced. Draco doesn't want us to keep seeing each other because he's sure he didn't make me happy. That he wasn't good enough for me."

Harry grunted. "He's right," he snapped.

"You're not being supportive," Hermione said, more tears falling but without the hysteria.

"Okay, okay. I'm sorry," he said quickly, hugging her tightly. He didn't want to be the one to make her cry. "How did you guys divorce so quick?"

Hermione sniffled and gave him an annoyed look, remembering that Harry wasn't always the brightest crayon in the box when he woke up in the mornings. "The clause in the pre-nup annulled the marriage automatically, remember? No baby, no marriage. I refused to get pregnant so we're over. Two weeks ago he told me that we would work things out, stay together. But yesterday morning he was cold and he said all those things to me. He doesn't want us to be together and it hurts so much," she murmured. "I fell in love with the bastard and he kicked me out of his life without a backwards glance."

Harry's green eyes softened as he held her. "Is there something I can do?"

"Can I stay here with you while I look for a flat of my own?"

He nodded. "Sure you can stay! Look, I don't mind you staying permanently. I have more than enough room. You can be my roommate," he said, squeezing her gently.

"What about Pansy?" Hermione muttered.

"She's not the jealous type. Besides, she knows I love you like a sister," Harry replied with a smile.

Hermione moved back to look him in the eyes. "I'm sorry for overreacting and being a total idiot with you because of your relationship with Pansy."

He shook his head. "Don't apologize. I wasn't honest with you and you had a right to react that way. Especially after you told me what the reason for your marriage had been. What do you say we forget about everything and start over from that point?" he asked with a grin.

Hermione nodded and hugged him. "Thank you for going through this with me, Harry."

"Don't thank me, Mione. I will be paying Malfoy a visit and maybe I'll even tell Ron the whole truth so that he can help me," he muttered.

"Don't you dare!" Hermione yelled. "I don't want anything to do with Malfoy ever again, and I don't want Ron to know about the blackmail either. He's happy with his wife and son and I don't want to disturb that, okay?" she asked seriously.

"Whatever," Harry muttered angrily, and technically he hadn't agreed to keep things to himself. He'd just have to meet with Ron outside of his place so that Hermione wouldn't throw a hissy fit and jinx them both, or worse, rearrange their memories. Malfoy would be meeting Harry Potter's fist soon. "Come on," he said, pulling her to her feet. "We need to get your room fixed up, and I think you'll like this one. It overlooks the river, just like mine."

"Thanks again, Harry. This means the world to me. Especially now," Hermione said, gathering her purse. There would be no going back for Malfoy. Their relationship was dead and buried by his hand and she would do nothing to bring it back to life.

Harry scowled to himself. Hermione hadn't gone to work in a week; hell, she hadn't left the flat really, and he was starting to worry. She only came out of her room to eat and to occasionally watch the TV. She had her own private bathroom in her room. She'd lay in bed, in her sweatpants and a large, long-sleeved shirt with her hair pulled back into a long braid. He had even resorted to calling Ron and asking him to come over. Especially now that news had gotten out that she and Malfoy had separated. So far there were only rumors, but the media was digging and would probably find out the truth soon. Harry knocked the door to her room before entering. She was still in bed, facing the window, and there were many tissues scattered on the floor to her right.

"Mione? Why don't you get up? You can't keep putting off work. Think of Neville and all the work he's probably trying to get done without you!" he said, sitting down next to her and rubbing her arm.

Hermione cracked a smile. "Since I took this week off too, to mope, so did Neville. He's had three weeks of paid vacation. Besides, I'm going back to work on Monday, but thanks for trying

to guilt-trip me into going to work. Let me have these last three days, Harry. Then I'll go back to work and I'll forget about all that's happened."

"Will you really?" Harry asked her softly.

Hermione sat up and looked him in the eye. "I just need time, Harry. Don't worry about me."

Just as he was about to reply, there was the sound of footsteps nearing and they heard a familiar voice call, "Potter, where are you?"

"In here!" Harry called back.

Ron stepped into the room and Hermione spotted a cute, chubby baby in his arms. "I brought Roan to visit and because Lav needs some quiet time," he said, spotting Hermione; she looked pitiful. Ron wondered if the rumors were true as he looked around the room; it was obvious that she was living here now. His eyes met Harry's.

"She wanted some privacy. No one but Pans knows that she's here. Sorry."

Ron shook his head. "Don't worry, man. Is it true, Hermione? You two are separated?" he asked, walking over to sit next to her too.

Hermione smiled at the baby and felt her eyes water. If she hadn't been so stubborn, she could've been pregnant, or would've had a newborn of her own. She and Draco would've still been—she shook her head. No, she had done the right thing. She couldn't second guess her decision when Draco had broken things off. Hermione came back to herself at the touch of Ron's hand on her cheek, rubbing the tears away from her face. "We've been divorced for a week," she mumbled.

Ron forced her to meet his eyes. "Come again?" he asked in a low tone.

"Tell him the truth, Mione. All of it," Harry said, taking the baby into his arms.

"Harry!" Hermione hissed in warning.

"What's he talking about? What truth?" asked Ron, standing up and towering over them.

"If you weren't holding Roan I would—"

She was cut off by Harry. "If you don't tell him, I will. He has a right to know. And now that you're divorced, now that you hate Malfoy again, we can make him pay," Harry said, green eyes lit with an angry fire.

At Hermione's silence and tightly pressed lips, he began to speak to Ron, who was looking confused. He started from the very beginning, not missing anything. "Harry, please stop!" Hermione pleaded, tears trailing from her eyes. He shook his head and turned back to Ron, explaining the pre-nup and how she had forgiven Malfoy after he had given back the property.

Ron was blinking fast, trying to take it all in and process it, but it was a little overwhelming to know that she had sacrificed herself for his parents. "That doesn't explain why she looks all depressed."

Harry nodded and felt bad that Hermione was sobbing again, but this needed to be done. He rocked his godson gently and sighed. "Malfoy told her they could keep seeing each other after the divorce—annulment—whatever it's called. But the day after they were automatically separated, he broke-up with her. Told her he doesn't want to be with her because he's not good enough for her. Told her he wants her to be happy."

"Harry, please," Hermione tried again, noticing that Ron was beyond angry, his face reddening by the minute. "The worst part of it all," Harry murmured, "is that she fell in love with him. She fell in love with him and Malfoy broke her heart."

The brunette put her face in her hands and cried. "Harry," Ron said quietly. "Give my son to Hermione."

She looked up momentarily, blinded by her tears, and she started when Harry placed the baby in her arms. "What? Why? Where are you going?" she asked, wiping her face with her sleeve as she stood and followed them, holding Roan against her shoulder. Ron and Harry were already holding a handful of floo powder.

"Take care of him, Mione. There's a bottle of formula and diapers in the bag, just in case. We won't take long," said Ron.

Harry gave her a solemn look before mouthing, "I'm sorry." Then he called out his destination. "Malfoy Manor!" Ron followed before she could do anything but blink. Hermione rocked Roan and tried to sooth him as he let out a cry of fright due to the noise the floo had made.

She prayed to Merlin that Harry and Ron didn't get thrown into prison for murder, but the wounded, heartbroken part of her felt a vindictive surge of pleasure at the thought of Draco Malfoy in pain.

Sleeping alone was definitely going to get some getting used to. He'd been feeling miserable for months now, knowing that he and Hermione were going to end. Three weeks ago he had been all up for continuing their relationship. But then he had stared long and hard at the image of her with Weasley and he had realized that he had never seen that look on her face during their marriage. She'd come close, but it seemed like there was always something stopping her from loving him. He had never counted on falling for her himself. Letting her go had been the hardest decision he had made and he wanted to kick himself at times for not allowing her the chance to discuss their break-up or to convince him that they could work out. That someday she would love him back. Draco supposed he was a coward. He had been afraid that she would never love him and that she would leave him first. He'd taken matters into his own hands and had let her go.

"Master Draco! Master Draco! Harry Potter and his friend are wanting to see you! they is threatening to break down the doors if master does not see them!" A very scared looking elf said after he came barreling into the study where his master was brooding.

Draco rolled his eyes. It had taken them long enough. He stood and walked out, feeling unafraid and numb. He missed his spicy Gryffindor and he felt like nothing else mattered to him at the moment. Not even the thought of pain at the hands of Weasley and Potter. As soon as he left his study, the Weasel blindsided him with a right hook that knocked him back.

"Get up you slimy git!" Ron yelled. "Did you think I would never find out about what you did to Hermione? She's not alone you arsehole! She has us both to protect her!" he snarled.

Draco surged to his feet and returned the punch, catching Ron off guard, but then Potter was there and it turned into a war. It wasn't fair really, two against one, but Draco gave as good as he got. They shattered a vase, a mirror hanging on the wall where Potter's back impacted with it, and a pillar holding a bust that nearly broke Ron's nose. While on the ground, his cheek throbbing, Draco rammed his booted foot into Potter's ribs, hearing a satisfying crunch, but then Weasel pulled him up and hurled him into the marble banister of the staircase. The blond winced in pain; there had been a definite crack in his wrist and it hurt to move it.

Potter advanced towards him, holding his side, but then Hermione was there, wand in hand, eyes ablaze and anger clear on her face. She didn't even bother to look at him once. "That's enough!" she screamed at Potter as he pulled up Weasel from where he had been nursing his elbow.

"Where is my son?" the red-head asked.

"Sleeping on Harry's bed, but I won't leave unless you two do, and he'll be alone," she threatened, feeling sick in her stomach to have used Roan in order to control his father.

Ron turned to Draco. "That was for ruining her life. If I ever see you near her again, Malfoy, be sure that I will knock your head off!" he snarled before taking the floo. Potter followed silently, leaving Draco alone with Hermione.

She looked at him then, noticing the bleeding lip and the darkening bruises on his face as he clutched his wrist. Her eyes were cold as she regarded him, and Draco wanted to say something. Anything to wipe that look off her face. Merlin, he didn't want her to hate him anymore, but he had screwed things up. Just as he opened his mouth to say something to her, she was gone. He sighed heavily and stood, summoning his wand so that he could tend to his wounds on his own. He was just thankful that his parents were out with his sister and they hadn't been present in the destruction of the main foyer. His life was hell.

After mending three fractured ribs, an elbow, and many cuts and bruises, Harry Potter and Ron Weasley had received the lecture of their lives. Hermione had never been so angry in her life. But Harry's defense had been that they were her brothers and that they were standing up for her, getting back at the one who had wronged her. Though she had been deeply touched by his words, her anger hadn't been minimized. Ginny had come over to see her and had been met with a very guilty looking pair of men. The two girls had moved to Hermione's room and they had talked about all that had happened. Hermione had cried again, Ginny had wanted to kill Draco, but she had stayed at her friend's side. She wasn't as brainless as her brother and her ex-boyfriend. She had even been generous enough to tell her that Blaise wanted to take Hermione out to dinner.

Later during the day, Pansy had come over and she and Hermione had started their friendship over. It felt good to have her friends and family back, even though she had lost a husband and a lover. A downside to it all was that now word had gotten out of her divorce to Draco; they had kept it under wraps for almost an entire month before the media found out from Draco Malfoy himself. He had given an interview to The Prophet and things had been hell since then. She had

had to band reporters from entering the trauma center unless they had a creature emergency or were there to ask her questions about the trauma center.

But her problems with the media were moot. She was currently sitting in Ron and Lavender's living room, a month after the whole fighting incident, holding Roan and smiling at the fact that he was gumming a teddy bear she had given him. Though things with Lavender were still tense, the other woman was making an effort to be her friend. Hermione looked up when Lavender stepped into the room with a tray of homemade cookies and a tall glass of iced tea. "So, how are you?" Lavender asked casually.

"I'm okay, thank you for asking." They stayed in a comfortable silence before Hermione broke it, a tentative smile on her face. "I don't want things to be this way between us Lavender. I love Ron like a brother and I want you to know that I will never do anything to jeopardize your marriage to him. You're both my friends and I want you and I to be okay," she said sincerely.

Lavender smiled back and nodded. "I would like that too, and don't worry, I know Ron's love for you and me is different. We may have had our differences, and I'm sure we always will because we're so different, but I consider you a great person, Hermione."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, feeling a great weight lift from her shoulders at Lav's words. She then frowned when she felt a strange feeling crawling through her body. She had been feeling it for the past two weeks. She had been meaning to go to the doctor but there had been so much work to do at the trauma center after three weeks of her and Neville's absences. Now she knew that she couldn't keep putting it off. "Lav, can you please take the baby? I'm not feeling too well."

The blonde jumped to her feet with a worried frown and took her son. "What's wrong? Do you need me to get you a healer or some type of medicine?" she asked urgently, her maternal side kicking in.

"No, I'm okay. I'll just go splash some water on my face to see if that'll work," Hermione said, standing with some difficulty. As she was crossing the threshold, she paused and felt a huge wave of nausea hit her just as her vision tilted.

"Hermione?" Lavender asked urgently, coming to her side. "Hermione?!" she almost screamed when the brunette started to fall. She covered Roan's ears and shrieked for Ron before she tried to keep Hermione from hitting the floor.

Ron raced into the room, followed by Harry and Pansy, who had come over for lunch, and he was at Hermione's side in seconds, holding her up. "What happened?" he asked as his friend slumped completely in his arms.

"I don't know! She was holding the baby and asked me to take him back because she wasn't feeling too well. Then as she walked towards the restroom I noticed something was wrong and she started to fall!" she said urgently, smoothing Hermione's hair from her face. "Take her to St. Mungos! This can't be normal!"

Ron nodded and he and Harry joint apparated to St. Mungos. The medi-witches ran to them and took Hermione to an examination room. Ron explained what Lavender had said to him and he and Harry were forced to stay in the waiting room as a healer looked Hermione over and tried to figure out what was wrong with her. After a while of waiting, Harry saw that Hermione's personal

healer had been called to her room.

"I can't take this anymore," Harry said, standing and walking towards the room. He knocked and waited before the door opened and a medi-witch poked her head out. "Please, we just need to know if she's okay! Has she even woken up yet?" he asked.

"Let them in, please," Hermione said from where she was still lying in the examination bed. They walked to her side, faces full of concern. It was touching, really. "I'm okay. Just been feeling a little down for about two weeks."

"And there's a very important reason for that," her healer said with a small smile. "Should we have some privacy or would you like your friends here with you?" she asked as she ushered the medi-witches out and the healer who had first seen her left now that she was talking with someone who knew her history.

Hermione frowned, placing a damp towel on her forehead. "They can stay. These two know my entire life better than I do," she said with a fond smile. Harry took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "So, what's wrong with me?"

"You're pregnant," said the healer.

"WHAT?!" All three yelled, Hermione sitting up abruptly and regretting when the nausea returned.

"How is that possible?" she asked, laying back down and feeling as if the ceiling was about to crash over her. Please, no more tears! she told herself as she started to sniffle and her eyes watered.

"Now, Hermione, do I really have to explain it to you?" asked the healer cheerily.

"No, not that. I was supposed to be drinking that potion. How could this happen?" she asked.

"When was the last time you and your husband had intercourse?" asked the healer.

"I think maybe we should leave," said Harry, looking pale. "We'll wait for you outside, Mione!" he said as he and Ron nearly ran out of the room.

Hermione had blushed red at the question, especially while Ron and Harry were in the room with her, but it was her own fault because she had asked them to stay. "The thirty-first of June," she replied, remembering the night as if it had only happened yesterday. They had been together thirty minutes before they were officially divorced.

"Time?"

"It was almost midnight. Why?" Hermione asked.

"Because the potion you take is over as soon as the clock hits midnight the first of each month and you have to take the new dose. Do you think that maybe your activity may have stretched until after midnight?"

"I don't know. I wasn't exactly looking at the clock while we were... you know..." she trailed off,

not able to stop the blush. But then that would explain why their marriage had been annulled anyway. She had gotten pregnant after midnight, after they were divorced. She sighed heavily. She had also forgotten to take the potion for that month.

The healer looked at her. "I'm sorry about your marriage. I know you must be going through a rough time. Especially now."

Hermione sat up slowly and smiled. "I can deal with it. I'm not going to lay down and die for one man," she murmured. "I guess now I have another reason to move forward," she said, patting her stomach.

"I need you to come back in a week so that I can give you a pre-natal check up. There are a lot of things that we have to check in order for you to have a normal, happy pregnancy," said the healer with a smile.

A baby. Hermione bit her lip to keep it from trembling. This baby was coming at the worst possible time. Even worse than during a loveless marriage. But just knowing that inside her was growing a piece of Draco made her heart soar. Even though he didn't love her, this baby would and that was good enough for her.

"You look beautiful, as always," Blaise complimented as he walked with Hermione towards their table in one of the most expensive and extravagant restaurants in London. "You're glowing, actually."

Hermione smiled, smoothing a careful hand down her still flat stomach. She had worn one of her most flattering black dresses that clung to her curves and left a long line of leg exposed. Her hair was in wild, silky curls down her shoulders and she had put on a bit of make-up. After crying for a few days straight, she had needed this. To feel beautiful and admired again. Though she loved Ron and Harry to death, they didn't really know how to compliment her very well. But Blaise, well, he was smooth and eloquent and knew exactly how to stroke her female vanity. "Where did you leave Ginny?" Hermione asked as they were seated.

"With her brother Ron. She went to see her kid nephew," he said with a smile. "Would you like some wine?" he asked as the waiter stood, patiently awaiting their order.

"I can't. I'll just have a Virgin Mary," she said with a smile.

Blaise cleared his throat. "I guess I'll have the same," he said with a frown. "What do you mean you can't?"

Hermione sighed. "I'm pregnant," she whispered, winking at him.

He choked on a breath. "What?!" he asked, a grin on his face. "You're having a baby?" he asked before giving her hand a squeeze. He was very aware that they were in a public place and hugging her would be frowned upon when he had a girlfriend. "You're serious?"

"Very. Though I still don't know what I'm going to do with a baby of my own," she admitted as she looked through her menu.

Blaise gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll be a wonderful mother, I'm sure. Draco is the father I

assume?" At her nod he pursed his lips. "Have you told him?"

She shook her head. "I don't know how I'm going to tell him. I don't know if I even want to tell him after the way we ended," she said, taking a sip of her drink as soon as the waiter brought it over. They ordered their food and talked for a while longer as they waited. She had ordered a plate of Fettuccini Alfredo, but as her eyes had taken in Blaise's Steak, her stomach had roiled with a sick wave of nausea. To make matters worse, her ex-husband was currently walking into the room.

"What a git," Blaise muttered, noticing who was accompanying Draco.

Hermione looked up and bit her lip in anger. Daphne Greengrass was at his side. Her eyes met his and everything seemed to freeze for a few seconds, but then he looked away and the illusion was shattered. Her nausea returned full force and she stood and ran to the restroom, almost knocking over a waiter who managed to save his tray full of drinks. She made it to a stall and dry-heaved for a few seconds, since there had been no food in her stomach since morning. The tears fell then, against her will. Merlin, she was so tired of crying, but she knew that her hormones were out of control because of her condition. It took her a while to get into rights before she washed her face and hands and walked back towards her table.

Blaise intercepted her in the hall. "Do you want to go home? If this is too hard for you we can go," he said, taking her arm when she swayed slightly.

"I'm so sorry for ruining our dinner. Do you think we can abandon this place for a pizza?" she asked sheepishly.

"Sure, just let me go pay for what we didn't eat and we're out of here," he said, leaving her alone for a few minutes.

"You don't have to leave because I'm here," said Draco, startling her from her thoughts.

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "I'm not leaving because of you, or your little girlfriend. That would make me seem as if I actually cared that you're here," she said coldly.

He stared at her for a long moment, his gray eyes unreadable, his expression a little sad. "How are you?"

This is your chance, tell him, her heart was saying. But her brain bristled—as if that were humanly possible—and held her back from telling him anything remotely nice. "Better than when I was married to you," she replied with a smirk.

He sighed and nodded. "That's good."

"Look, let's not make this anymore uncomfortable. Go back to your date and forget you even saw me. I'm fine. I just think I had something bad for breakfast," she muttered. "Good luck with what's-her-name. Dating married women now, it's a new low for you," she said just as Blaise was coming over.

"Ready?" Blaise asked as he handed helped her into his coat and purse. She nodded and turned away without another word. "Did you tell him?" he asked softly. "Are you okay?" She shook her head and refused to speak, but he noticed the tears on her face and the fact that she

was clutching his arm meant she was in obvious distress.

Draco watched them go and felt as if she had stabbed something jagged into his heart. He knew she wasn't okay. He could see it in her eyes, which had always been so expressive of her feelings. He didn't want to hurt her anymore, but it was obvious that tonight he had hurt her. He couldn't leave things like this. He needed to speak to her, make her see that their divorce had been for the best, even though it hadn't felt like it. Even though inside he felt as if his insides had been ripped to shreds now that he didn't have her anymore.

He would fix things. He didn't know how, but he would.

Okay, so most of you were right about Herm's being pregnant, and there's no chance that they are still married. Sorry. But there is a baby on the way and that baby will bring a surprise with him or her in the next chapter, but I can't tell you what it is. All you can know is that in the next chapter, our dear Draco finds out that he's going to be a daddy. But aren't Ron and Harry great friends? That's why I named the chapter Brothers, and for Blaise too. I would've kicked Draco's butt too, but then again, Herm's is to blame in their break-up too.

About Draco's little sister, I know her name wasn't too creative, and I didn't like it much either, but I couldn't find a name that would suit her. Sorry about that bit, guys and girls—though I think we're all girls reading and writing—But bear with me for a while. Next chapter is going to be slightly better for our couple, but not by much. So don't start sharpening your pointy knives and weapons please!(I think my bomb shelter is starting to look appealing again.)

Oh, and you know what? We hit 98 reviews for the last chapter! Thank you everyone who read and reviewed, you people make my day. Have a great week and I hope this chapter was to everyone's liking.

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 14: Seeing Double

But no matter how I try

I can't hate you anymore

"Are you alright?" Neville asked as he stepped into her office and placed a cup of tea in front of her.

Hermione was leaning back in her large, comfortable chair, a grimace on her face. "I'm okay. It's just that my stomach is giving me problems this morning," she muttered.

Neville sat down in front of her and looked over some of the papers strewn over her large, mahogany desk. Hermione sighed heavily and dictated to a Quick Quotes Quill. Already her child was more like his or her father than anyone knew. The baby was making her life a living

hell with the morning sickness and the dizzy spells.

She'd found out in that past week since she had been told she was pregnant that she couldn't stomach the taste or smell of red meat. Harry had been banded from eating meat in front of her or in the house whenever she was in smelling range. He'd also had to change the detergent he used to wash his clothes. It was disturbing that being pregnant somehow made her sense of smell super elevated.

"Tomorrow we will start working on the bone healing salve. That's the most used salve and our healers are down to one weeks worth of stock," she said to Neville before taking a sip of her herbal tea. She sighed in relief when her stomach placated a little. "Hey, Nev... how did you react when Parvati told you that she was having Frankie?"

Neville flushed in embarrassment. "I passed out," he said with a grin. Hermione giggled. "Had a nasty bump on my head when I came to. I think I hit the edge of the coffee table. Why do you ask?"

Hermione shrugged and sat back. "I'm just curious." Besides, I know Draco's reaction is going to be far more explosive than yours, she thought, but she wouldn't be telling him yet. "Let's get to work. I have a doctor's appointment today and I'd like us to finish this on time," she said, trying to ignore her stomach as it started complaining again.

Draco scowled to himself as he stepped into the trauma center. He had almost gotten run over by a little girl with a crup in her arms. The front desk was deserted and he vaguely wondered where the girl who usually sat there was. Better for him. This way Hermione wouldn't be able to give some excuse to not see him. He had been up all night, trying to figure out what he would say to her today, and he'd even managed to make a list. That list was blank right now.

As he moved closer to the door that had a golden plaque engraved with the words Hermione Granger, Director, he could hear voices coming from inside. "Oh, Nev. If you only knew how morning sickness feels like for a woman, who would have a new found respect for Parvati's complaining..." He heard Hermione trail off.

"Morning sickne—Hermione!" Neville exclaimed. "Are you pregnant?"

She was quiet for a moment, unaware that on the other side of the door was the unsuspecting father. Draco felt as if his knees had turned to jelly when she gave a quiet affirmation. He pushed the door open and stared at her as she sat up abruptly in her chair, grimacing and placing a hand over her mouth. Neville looked at him with wide eyes, but wisely kept quiet.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione snapped.

"I think there's something rather pressing that we need to discuss," he said in a controlled tone. Things wouldn't go well if he started yelling at her.

"It's impolite to eavesdrop," Hermione hissed.

"Then how else would I have found out that you're pregnant?" he asked, anger making him raise his voice. "Because it's very obvious you weren't planning on telling me."

Neville stood and gathered some papers. "I'll be in my office in case you need me, Hermione," he said before leaving quickly.

Hermione sat there and scowled, feeling the morning sickness recede. "I wasn't purposely keeping this from you. I just didn't know how and when to tell you," she said, taking another sip of her tea.

Draco glared at her. "How about you telling me the day you found out? This isn't something you could've kept from me. How long have you known?"

"A few days," she snapped as she stood, thankful that no nausea or dizziness accompanied her. "And why should I have done that after the way you kicked me out of your life so coldly? Did you think that I was in a rush to let you know that you weren't going to get your wish? That now we are going to be tied together through a child for the rest of our lives? How are we going to raise a baby when we aren't together anymore?" she asked angrily.

"Oh, and whose fault is that?" he asked darkly.

"Don't you dare blame this on me! You were the one who ended things permanently. The last thing I wanted was to have a child under these circumstances! Hell, I didn't even want a baby when we were married, for reasons that I am tired of repeating."

"Yes, it kind of slipped my mind that you were so very in love with Weasley, and probably still are. Have you already made a move on him? Doesn't it matter to you that he's already married? You know, it's not too late for you to get rid of this kid and then get Weasel to make you a new one that you would be perfectly happy with, since that's what you've always wanted isn't it?" he asked her snidely. He ducked the cup of tea she hurled at his face.

"Don't talk to me that way or I swear to Merlin that this will be the only child you ever father," she spat. "If you would've had faith in me, any at all, you would've seen that I—that I... cared about you. But you took it upon yourself to burry any feelings I had for you. You decided to destroy everything. You never asked me what it was that I wanted!" she yelled, pressing her palms against her eyes.

"Everything I did to you ended up hurting you either way. Nothing I did was ever enough to make you stop thinking of Weasley. I didn't want to hurt you anymore. That's why I let you go, because I knew that your heart would always belong to him."

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. Was that heartbreak in his eyes? "How could you possibly know that without asking me?" she murmured.

Draco stared at her. "I'm sorry."

She nodded. "So am I. But you don't have to deal with this. This baby will have everything he needs with me; I'll be enough," she said, giving him the one and only chance to turn around and leave. She wasn't going to force him into being a father. Apparently she said the wrong thing.

His eyes narrowed and he took a few steps forward so that they were almost nose to nose. "Whatever happens between you and me will never interfere with me being a father to this child. I have a right to be there every step of the way if I choose to. Besides, no matter what you say, you can't raise a baby alone. I want to help," he said, all seriousness and not breaking their

eyes contact for a long moment.

"I don't need you," Hermione said slowly.

"Tough shit. This isn't about just you anymore. This baby is half mine and I plan on being a good father," he said.

Hermione gave him a bitter smile. "Well, if you're as good a father as you were a husband, I shouldn't expect much, should I? Are you planning on giving on parenting if something doesn't go your way?" she snarked.

Draco glared at her but didn't rise to the bait. He knew very little about pregnancies in general, having kept away from his mother throughout her nine months, but he remembered that she had avoided stress at all cost because it hadn't been good for the baby. And apparently, he was stressing Hermione out. "We need to make arrangements," he said, stepping away from her and giving her space.

"What do you mean?" she questioned, using her wand to repair the broken cup that had held her tea and had shattered against the wall.

"You have to let me know when your appointments are going to be, ahead of time, so that I can go with you. I want to be a part of this with you. You can also start moving your things back to the Manor. I don't fancy the idea of you overexerting yourself and working when you don't have to," he said calmly, straightening his tie in a slightly nervous gesture.

Hermione felt her blood boil. "I'm not incapacitated, you idiot. I'm pregnant, and just because life is growing inside of me, it doesn't mean I can't lift a finger," she snapped, sitting at her desk and organizing some papers. "I don't want you to crowd me either. I'll be having regular check-ups every month and I don't want you at every single one. I need space. Take it or leave it."

Draco scowled. "Fine. My only concern is your and this child's well being."

Right. She knew he was just being polite, but all he cared about was the baby. And that was fine. She wanted to keep their contact to minimum, even though it still hurt her to realize that he really didn't care about her. That was why he didn't have to know that later that afternoon she would have her first appointment. Petty, yes, but Hermione was in the mood to indulge in petulance. "And I'm not moving into the Manor. I'm perfectly fine where I am," she said, scribbling a few notes on a notepad next to her. "If you have nothing else to say to me, you know where the door is."

Draco almost winced at her dismissal. Almost. "I just want to explain something to you," he said quietly. Hermione looked up and gave him an expectant look. "The other night I took Daphne to dinner because she's going through some rough times in her marriage. Turns out McLaggen has a wandering eye. She's an old friend, but nothing more," he said seriously.

Hermione gave him a blank look. "Why are you justifying yourself to me? As per your request, we no longer mean anything to each other. You do what you want with your life and I'll do what I want with mine," she said nonchalantly.

He nodded, his expression unreadable. She was right. He had brought this on them and now had to deal with it. Hermione may have been responsible for the end of their marriage, for not

bending her will, but all the blame of their broken relationship and their current situation was on his shoulders.

"Oh, and in case you were wondering, because it looks like you're not, the baby was conceived after we were divorced. Have a nice day," she said, dismissing him.

"Let me know when your next appointment is," he said before leaving.

Hermione swiveled her chair around to face the window and forced back tears. She wasn't so naïve to believe that Greengrass was only his friend. She let out a shaky breath and brushed her tears away. Having a baby should've been the highlight of her life, but so far all she had been able to do was shed tears of sorrow. She was still sniffing when Neville walked back in to see if she was okay. But she wasn't, and Neville, being the sensitive boy Hermione remembered, tried to cheer her up.

"Hermione? Did you know that there's a big, yellow stain on the wall over there?" he asked.

She looked over and let out a small laugh at the look on his face. "Sorry, Nev. Draco made me angry and I hurled the tea and cup at him. I obviously missed," she said, still smiling. She waved her wand and the yellow spot was gone, leaving a pristine, pale blue wall once again. "Let's get to work, Nev. A little girl brought in a crup that swallowed an unknown potion that freezes it, literally every hour. Seamus has been trying different potions but they're not working. It's up to us to find it a cure before it dies of hypothermia," she said, sitting down and getting back to business.

Neville hesitated before opening his mouth. If Hermione had taught him something during school and the years he had spent as her assistant, it was that he should voice his thoughts without fear. Besides, she was his friend. "Be strong, Hermione. A baby is a blessing and it doesn't matter under what circumstances. That little life is counting on you to protect it and nurture it. In the end you'll see that all the hard work pays off. There's nothing like looking into the eyes of your baby for the very first time," he said proudly.

Hermione smiled. Neville was right. Even though right now everything looked and felt impossible, she had the courage to move on. She needed to move on for her baby and herself.

"How was your first appointment?" Harry asked when Hermione got home.

"Pretty well. The baby is fine and healthy, and so am I, but healer Banks says my stress levels are high. I have to cut back on some work for the baby's sake," she said, sitting on the biggest couch and pulling off her shoes so that she could lie down. "I'm having cravings for Won Ton soup. Want some take out?" she asked, sitting up.

Harry nodded and stood. "Relax, I'll order it. Do you want anything else?"

Hermione thought it over and nodded. "Get me an order of Orange chicken and fried rice, please," she said, her mouth watering.

Thirty minutes later, they were eating and watching one of the original Star Wars movies. There was a loud tapping at the window and Harry stood to get it. A large owl flew in and dropped a package next to Hermione before leaving quickly. She set down her food and chopsticks and

opened the parcel. The box looked fancy and had an envelope sticking to the top. She opened the letter and read.

'Thank you for letting me know that you had an appointment today. I spoke to your healer and she let me know that you're too stressed, so I decided to write my complaint to you instead of showing up at your home and stressing you out further. I'm willing to overlook you keeping me away this time, but I won't the next.' Oh, yeah? What was he going to do if she didn't tell him of her next appointment? Sue her? Take the baby away? Yeah, good luck with that, Malfoy, Hermione thought snidely.

She kept reading. 'I don't want to hurt you anymore, I told you that earlier today, and I want to be a good father as well. But I won't be able to accomplish this if you sabotage my relationship with our child from the very beginning. So I am asking you, for the sake of our kid, please let us put our differences aside? Besides, even if you say no, and you make things hard, I already know when your next appointment is going to be. In case you need anything, anything at all, don't hesitate to let me know. Take care of our baby and yourself. DM.'

Hermione rolled her eyes and threw the letter into the fireplace before igniting it with her wand. She then took the box and opened it. She blinked in shock, her heart speeding up at what she saw under the delicate, silvery tissue paper. A sob caught in her throat as she pulled out a tiny, white outfit made of the softest material she had ever touched, complete with a baby hat, and a beautiful blanket. "Why is he always doing this to me?!" she shrieked, placing the things back into the box.

"What's wrong?" Harry asked worriedly.

"He makes me hate him, then love him, then hate him and love him again!" she cried in frustration.

"Calm down. You're stressing and it's not good for the baby," said Harry, handing her the soup she had neglected because it had been too hot.

Hermione let out a deep breath and nodded. She had to think of her baby. Draco didn't matter. Her problems didn't matter. All she cared about now was being strong for the child growing inside her. But that was the first gift she received for her kid, and it was a bit overwhelming that it had come from Draco, of all people. She sniffled and looked at the outfit again, a small smile on her face as she pictured a tiny baby with the shape of her eyes, but the color of his, wearing the little outfit and wrapped in the warm blanket.

Harry watched her covertly, feeling his heart go out to her when her bottom lip trembled as she looked at the baby clothes. Though he had no idea whether Malfoy loved her or not, he did remember that he had never seen Hermione shed a tear during her second year of marriage. Maybe Malfoy wasn't all that bad, but he had been an idiot to let Hermione go. He'd made the wrong move, and now he and Ron would protect Hermione with everything they had because she had two fierce brothers with them. Malfoy wouldn't hurt her ever again if they had anything to say about it.

"Hey babe," Pansy greeted Harry when he opened the door to his flat.

He grinned and kissed her before closing the door behind them. "I wasn't expecting you until

this evening," he said, wrapping an arm around her waist.

"Well, I'm going with Hermione to her appointment this month. She didn't want Draco to go with her because during last month's appointment he kept asking stupid questions, or so Hermione says. I think it just irks her to see his face, with all the hormonal imbalance and whatnot. So she told him that I was going with her to this appointment. He was very angry but he let her have her way," she explained, shaking her head. "I honestly don't know how those two are going to raise a baby together if they're always bickering. Draco is such an ass. It's obvious he's in love with her; I just can't understand why he broke-up with her," she said in annoyance, pushing her short hair behind her ear.

"Don't talk to me about your friend. If he hadn't been an asshole about their whole relationship, Hermione would be taking it easy and not crying herself to sleep every night," he muttered.

Pansy kissed his cheek. "I'm on her side, Potter. But Draco is my friend too. He was trying to do what he thought was best for her, even though it wasn't."

Harry was in the process of leaning forward to kiss her when a loud shattering startled them because it had come from Hermione's room. They both ran to her room, which was on the first floor, and burst in, their eyes landing on the shattered mirror. Pansy repaired it quickly and ran to Hermione, who was sprawled on her bed. "Are you okay? Are you hurt?" she asked quickly.

Hermione pushed her unruly hair back from her face and shook her head. "I was having a girl moment."

"What the hell does that mean?" Harry asked.

Hermione gave him the stink-eye. "That means that I'm three months pregnant and I don't fit into my jeans anymore," she spat. "I broke the mirror to see if it made me feel better. Guess what? I don't feel better!"

Pansy tried not to smile. She would've reacted the same way, or maybe worse, because she wasn't pregnant. "You've tried them all?"

Hermione let out an exaggerated sob. "Yes. None of them fit!"

Harry patted her shoulder. "At least the morning sickness is going away." He looked at his watch. "Aren't you going to be late?" he asked.

The brunette shrieked and stood, running to her closet to pull on a white, sleeveless sundress that reached her knees and a pair of flat sandals. She then twisted her long hair into a bun and placed hair pins in specific places to keep the heavy strands in place. "Okay, I'm ready. In record time too," she said as she grabbed her purse.

"See you later kid," said Pansy, pecking Harry on the lips before following her friend.

Harry just rolled his eyes and stood to go watch some TV. It was a good thing that he was Harry Potter and he wasn't forced to go to work everyday. All he was going to do today was watch movies and eat popcorn until his girlfriend arrived and they could go on their date. Maybe he would call Ron and see if he wanted to come over too, since Ron also needed a break from Lavender and sometimes Ron. He snickered. He loved being lazy.

"Okay, right now we are going to take a look at the baby and we'll get his measurements to see how long he is and how much he's weighing right now," said Healer Banks.

Hermione looked curious. "What are you going to use to see the baby?" she asked. She knew that muggles used ultrasound machines but until around the fourth month.

The healer smiled. "We have a more upgraded version of the ultrasound machine that allows us a more accurate and earlier view of the embryo. Just lay back and we can start," she said as she pulled a machine forward and turned it on with her wand.

Hermione let out a sigh and was thankful that Draco wasn't there with her. She was still feeling sensitive of the fact that her jeans no longer fit her because she already had a small bump on her stomach. It was disconcerting to have been slim all of her teenage years, and a couple of adult years, and now realize that her stomach was losing its flatness because there was a new life growing there.

"Okay, take a look here," said the healer, pointing to the screen of the machine. There was a strange shaped little thing in the center and then she heard the heartbeat. "This is the head, the spine and arms. Two... legs?" she asked it as a question and Hermione felt alarm shoot through her at the tone the healer was using.

"Is something wrong?" she asked as she sat up slightly.

Healer Banks smiled. "This is such a surprise. I think that—let me change the angle—yes, I am seeing double," she said gently. "Hermione, you're having twins."

"What?" Hermione asked in shock. "Are you sure? How is that even possible?"

"Here, take a look. I thought I saw more than two legs and once I change the angle, there was another baby there. There are two. As for how, there are many factors that could've influenced you conceiving twins. Do you or your ex-husband have any twins in your families?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not that I know of."

The healer walked over to her desk and looked through some papers, her face moving to a frown. "Were you taking any fertility potions? I remember the talk we had about you not wanting to have a child."

"No. You're right, I wasn't planning on having a baby, but Draco and I were together on the night that the monthly potion wore off. That's why I thought I had gotten pregnant," Hermione said.

Healer Banks shook her head. "You have an elevated level of fertility from what I can see. The last time you had this test was when you came in to make sure that you weren't pregnant. Since then, the levels had gone up significantly?"

Hermione looked at her babies, still showing on the screen of the machine and felt cold dread wash over her. "What exactly are you saying?" she asked.

"I'm saying that if you haven't been drinking a fertility potion, then someone else was giving it to

you behind your back," she said professionally.

Draco, Hermione hissed in her mind. That lying, no good, foul little roach! Oh, he was going to die at her hands the next time she saw him. "But the babies are okay, right? Merlin the great, I'm having twins," she gasped out, lying back down.

The healer smiled. "They are growing and healthy, but you must know that twins are special cases, even amongst Wizarding society. You need to take care of yourself more than ever because this will be a delicate pregnancy. Most twins don't gestate the full nine months because the room is limited in there, so it's possible that they will be a few weeks premature. We want to keep them in there as much as possible, but you will need monitoring and rest to accomplish it," she said seriously.

Hermione nodded. "And I'm going to take a guess and say that I'll have more appointments to keep a careful eye on them?"

"Yes. But if we both do everything we need to, you'll have a set of healthy twins in five. If we're lucky, it'll be in six months," she said reassuringly. "Go ahead and get yourself fixed up to rights. I'll just print you the first picture of your babies."

Hermione smoothed her dress down and removed the sheet that had been covering her bare legs before standing. Okay, so maybe going off on Draco wasn't an option anymore, since it would require screaming, cursing, and overall agitation on her part. She had to take care of her twins now that she knew that she was carrying them and they depended on her to be healthy.

She smiled as she looked at the small picture the healer had handed to her that showed two distinct shapes. Two. Even though she was beyond angry with Draco, she was going to be the mother of two children.

"One other thing. Since it appears that you were being given the fertility potion, the twins will most likely be fraternal, meaning that they won't look alike. Since there's no history of twin in your families, I'm almost positive, but we will be completely sure in a couple of months," said the healer as she walked her to the door. "Keep drinking your vitamins, except now you'll have to drink them twice a day because there are two you need to care of now."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you very much. When would you like me to return?" she asked.

"I want to see you back at the end of the month so that we can check on the twins and on you. At this same time will be good for you?" the healer asked.

"That would be fine. Thank you for everything," she said before she walked out the door, to find Pansy sitting on a chair in the waiting room with the person she least wanted to see at the moment. "I thought I told you I didn't want to see you today," she bit out.

Draco stood and wondered if she was angry at him—more than usual—or if it was the hormones. "How was the check up?" he asked.

"Just peachy. Turns out that someone was feeding me a fertility potion behind my back. I suppose you would have nothing to do with that?" she asked, dangerously calm.

Draco frowned and shook his head. "What are you talking about? Of course I wouldn't know

anything about that! Are you... insinuating that I was the one doing it?" he asked quietly.

"Who else then, Draco?" she hissed, anger coloring her face. "Who else was desperate for me to get pregnant, huh?" she asked, her voice rising. She looked around and was thankful that no one was nearby.

"I didn't do anything," he hissed angrily. "I wouldn't stoop so low."

Hermione scoffed in disbelief. "I find that hard to believe. Merlin, I don't even want to see you now," she cried, her voice breaking. "You know what came of me drinking that potion?" she asked softly. Draco looked away from the hurt in her eyes. She actually believed that he had been the one doing that to her. "I'm having twins, Draco. Are you listening to me? Two babies."

"Two?" he asked, his voice breaking in shock. Merlin, two?! How was that even possible? His family didn't have a history of twins, so that meant that the fertility potion she was referring to had worked more than well. Shit.

"I'm not angry at that, hell, I love them with all my heart already, but having twins will make this a delicate pregnancy and I don't want to lose them because I'm always so angry at you. So I am asking, no, I'm pleading for you to just keep your distance from me. I'll accept you coming to every appointment, you have that right, and you can be there once they're born, but you need to stay away from me for the sake of my nerves and their health."

Draco stared at her for a long moment. It hurt him to see her doubting him and thinking him capable of doing something so low to her, but what other good thing had he ever done for her? He could see it now, with crystal clarity. He loved her beyond anything he had ever felt and he would do anything for her. So he found himself nodding. "Okay. I will stay away. But you must believe me when I say that I was not the one who gave you that potion."

Then something occurred to him. His father and those sneaky looks on his face when Hermione had been drinking orange juice, or all the questions about whether or not she was fertile enough to give him a child. Son of a bitch. "Just, stay calm. I will not bother you ever again. Take care of yourself and like I said before, if you ever need anything, don't hesitate to let me know," he said before risking his life and leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead. Then he was gone.

Pansy suddenly appeared at her side and took her arm as they walked towards the floo. "Wasn't that a little harsh?" she murmured.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I'm just looking out for my kids and for myself. What I said was true. If I don't take it easy, they can be born before it's their time and they'll be premature and in danger. I don't want that. Not if I can help it. They'll be healthy and strong, and you know that I accomplish everything I set my mind to."

Pansy nodded and smiled. "So, two? Congratulations. Do you want us to go shopping while you still can? I know of the perfect baby place where you can get all you need."

Hermione grinned. "I'd like that," she said as they reached the floo and decided to go to Diagon Alley.

Lucius looked around at his surroundings in distaste. This was where the great Potter lived? He

really didn't know how to take advantage of his status. He sighed heavily and knocked the door. Today he and Narcissa had received the most peculiar news. His ex-daughter-in-law was expecting. Not one, but two children. Too bad her pregnancy was coming a little too late. But that hadn't been it. Draco had yelled at him in the most spectacular way that she had been fed fertility potion and that now Hermione thought that he had been the one to do it. Draco had ranted and raved at Lucius for a full twenty minutes before ordering him to fix the situation because he knew who had been the one to give her the potion.

So now here he was, waiting for the girl to deign him with her presence so that he could explain to her about the potion. The door opened and he was met by a suspicious looking Hermione Granger. "What are you doing here?" she asked him.

"May I come in?" he asked. "There are some things I am in dire need of explaining to you."

Hermione nodded and let him into the flat, still eying him. They stepped into the living room and Hermione motioned over to the couch so that they could sit. "How can I help you?"

Lucius cleared his throat but remained standing. "I'll get right to the point. Draco was not the one giving you the fertility potion... I was. He had nothing to do with it. In fact, I gave him the potion a couple of times as well without him knowing it. I wanted my son to be happy, and he would be happy with a child and you by his side for many years to come. I won't justify myself, I just wanted you to know that I had been the one to do it and that Draco was oblivious about it all."

Hermione stared at him, trying to remember how to breathe in her fury. She let out a deep breath and started to count down from fifty. Think of the twins. Think of the twins. Don't get overexerted and fly off the handle. It's not good for them. She ran a shaky hand through her hair. "And what gave you the right to do this to us?!" she asked softly.

Lucius could almost see the electricity crackling in her hair and was thankful that she didn't appear to have her wand on her. "None, I know. But I am a man who has never played by the rules. I know that what I did was wrong, but I'm not sorry. This way, you and Draco can remarry and be together again," he said simply.

She scowled and stood, her anger getting the better of her. "How dare you think you can make all these assumptions?!" she yelled. "Draco and I will never be together again. All you have accomplished is bringing two children into this world to divorced parents!"

"Please calm down. From what Draco yelled at me as well, I know that you cannot exert yourself for the sake of the children," he said calmly. She sat down heavily and put her head in her hands. Lucius shifted uncomfortably when he saw her shoulders shake and heard a sob come from her.

"Why did you do this to us? You've made things hard on me, on Draco, but especially on the two innocents on their way. They don't deserve coming into this world to such a jaded family. They deserve better."

"Then give them better," he said darkly. "You have always struck me as a smart and sensible woman. Draco loves you, even though he probably never said the words, but he is suffering as much as you. Why don't you two just start over and be happy with your children?" he asked quietly.

"It's not that easy," she said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Why not?"

"You would never understand. We have so much history that whenever he does something bad to me, forgiving him becomes harder and harder. He can be a father to the twins, and he can give them all they need, but Draco and I will never be together again," she said quietly.

"I must go. Narcissa and the brat are waiting for me," he said.

"How can you call Darlene a brat? She's such a sweet baby," Hermione said, still angry at him for what he had done. "And don't think that since you confessed to everything this makes not hate you."

Lucius smirked. "Have it your way. Just, don't cut Draco out of your life when he wants to be with you as much as you want to be with him. You can fix all this if you both let go of your stubbornness and your pride. Give these children a chance to be born into a happy family," he said quietly.

Hermione stared at him and wondered if he was going soft now that he was a father to a baby girl. "You know, at least when the twins get mad at each other, I can say, 'You can thank your grandfather for your twin.' That way they can get mad at you as well," she said wryly.

Lucius cracked a small smile. "This is not the way I saw myself having my first grandchildren, but... I am glad that you are their mother. Draco couldn't have picked a better mother for his children," he said before turning and leaving.

Hermione stared after him and realized that this had been the first time she had ever seen Lucius as a human being since she had met him. But she guessed that now she owed Draco some sort of apology for accusing him of giving her the potion that got her into the double predicament she was in. Still, maybe they were better off this way. Seeing Draco, having him near and knowing that she couldn't have him with her would be a heavy burden on her shoulders. Besides, the health of her babies depended on her keeping her cool and not stressing over things that were over and done with.

This chapter was especially dedicated to Monkeypants87, Caligirl-HPLVR, Radcliffe'sgirl4ever, Amarthiel, and of course Marm, for guessing correctly on the twins. You can all thank Lucius for that little stunt. Oh, and Monkeypants, double treat for you, because that ending was what you wanted to read. Zenith, yes the beginning of each chapter has lyrics from Nick Lachey's song, but you're the first person to point it out in the last twelve chapters, so many Draco shaped cookies for you.

Some pregnancy info may not be totally accurate, so if you guys see something that isn't right and you know the correct explanation, let me know and I'll correct it. I don't have kids so I don't know a lot of things regarding pregnancy.

I also had some trouble thinking of how the wizarding world handles pregnancies and how the see babies during the check-ups and all that. I was actually doing some research on twins, (Wikipedia) and I read that identical twins are usually born from families who have a history of twins in the family. They come from a single egg that was fertilized and split into two.

But our Hermy is going to have fraternal twins, which occurs the most for women who are undergoing fertilization treatments—in this case it happened without her knowing it—and can cause up to more than two eggs to be ovulated, which could result in triplets or more. It also goes on to say that they're not really twins because they are separately fertilized and grow in their own "bag" and are more like a regular brother and sister born at almost the same time, the same way they could've been two or three years apart—was that confusing? Sorry. But I hope you managed to get the idea. If not, just look up twins on Wikipedia and it'll give you the info better explained than my jumble of words.

Okay, so since I basically gave away this chapter in my last author review, you guys aren't getting anything this time. Sorry. I love you lots, but I like to keep you all guessing. I hope this chapter was to everyone's liking and I'll see you next time!

Byebye

!Joey!

P.S. Okay, I'll give you one thing. McLaggen makes an appearance in the next chapter! Duhn, duhn, duhn...

Chapter 15: Starting Over?

Hey! Just a quick note that this chappy is especially dedicated to Fnicks-Gurlz for writing the 1000th review for this fic! And I'll also dedicated to everyone who has thought this story is worth reading. Thanks a bunch!

Sometimes you hold so tight

It slips right through your hands

It wasn't every day that the maître d' of one of the most famous and recognized restaurants of the Wizarding world had the honor of being in the presence of Harry Potter, Hermione Granger—ex Malfoy, and Ronald Weasley. At least it was a big deal to him and most of the other patrons who were watching them in rapt attention as they were seated.

"I feel like an animal in an exhibit at the zoo," Hermione complained, looking at her menu.

"We are," Ron said, smiling and noticing that Hermione looked very pretty that evening. Both he and Harry were in dressy clothes, nothing too formal, and Hermione was wearing a very flattering dress that barely showed the round bump of her stomach.

"Are we allowed any meat yet?" asked Ron.

Hermione shook her head. "Sorry boys, but these two still won't let me go near any red meat yet," she replied, pointing to her stomach. "So, what are we celebrating?"

Ron cleared his throat. "Well, we brought you to dinner because Harry here," and he slapped him on the back, "has offered to marry you to help raise the twins."

"I have?" Harry asked, eyebrows raised in amusement.

Hermione broke into giggles, muffling them with her hand and trying not to attract more attention to them, as Ron laughed at the look on Harry's face. "Yeah, Pansy will claw my eyes out, twins or no twins," she said, around another bout of laughter.

"Well then, you should know that Ron has also offered to divorce Lavender to marry you as well. Hey, you can marry us both and we'll be a threesome," said Harry before the waiter approached them.

Hermione and Ron were still chortling as they made their orders for drinks and food. "Oh, guys. I haven't laughed like that in such a long time," she said, sipping the glass of water that had just appeared for each of them.

"Hmm, since I know that the three of us being married wouldn't work, especially if Mione is in prison for bigamy, let's just celebrate the fact that we're together again," said Harry with a smile.

Hermione nodded and Ron gave her a serious look. "But seriously, Hermione. We want you to know that we'll be here for whatever you may need. Don't ever hesitate to ask us for anything. Having two babies won't be a walk in the park, but you're the greatest witch we have ever known; we know you'll be able to do anything you set your mind to, but you'll need help from time to time."

Harry nodded. "We just want you to promise to tell us whenever you need help or whenever you feel overwhelmed. We're your brothers."

Hermione smirked. "Another reason why we shouldn't marry," she said. The men chuckled. "But thank you. You have no idea how much it means to me to hear you say these things to me, more so now when my hormones are all over the place," she said, squeezing their hands gently in hers as the food arrived. They had a pleasant time and were the center of attention for every single person who entered the restaurant.

As they were leaving, Hermione realized that she had left her purse at the table and Ron offered to retrieve it as she got their coats and Harry went to the men's room. Her long, black overcoat did a great job at hiding her stomach, though she had gained very little weight. Her healer had told her that it seemed that the twins were the ones gaining all the weight. She stifled a yawn and looked around nonchalantly.

"I knew it was you, attracting attention as always with that nightmare you call hair," said someone from behind her.

Hermione ground her teeth in annoyance. And her night had been going so well. "What can I do for you, Daphne?" she asked flatly.

The blonde looked angry. "I hope you're enjoying yourself. You weren't happy with destroying your marriage, you had to break up mine as well," she spat.

Hermione gave her a cool look. "I've no idea what you're talking about."

Daphne sneered. "Cormac and I are getting divorced because of you. He's leaving me to come

after you."

The brunette made a face. "I had nothing to do with that. I don't see how I can be to blame. I haven't even spoken to your husband since that day we saw each other in Venice. Besides, maybe those little dates with my ex-husband must've had something to do with his decision to divorce you," said Hermione calmly.

The other woman looked smug. "I bet you're just dying inside, knowing that he's moved on to someone better and so soon after your divorce."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Actually, I've never been more alive," she said slyly. "Maybe it's just the fact that life is growing inside of me." Daphne gave her a blank look. "Didn't Draco tell you? I'm pregnant," she said smugly, rubbing a hand over her rounded stomach.

Daphne looked as if she would pass out at any moment once her eyes had landed on Hermione's stomach. "Impossible," she hissed.

Hermione sighed dramatically. "But that's not all. I happen to be expecting twins. Can you imagine? Two babies with Draco's eyes?" Harry and Ron returned at that exact moment to see an evil smile on Hermione's face and a blonde who looked furious enough to hurt someone. "Have a pleasant dinner," she said, turning and leaving with the two men.

"What was that all about?" Ron asked.

"I just rubbed the twins in her face. I know it's petty, but she was looking for it. Apparently Draco hadn't told her that 'minor' detail. Idiot. She was completely oblivious. It makes me wonder how serious they are," she murmured, feeling the sting of tears approaching.

Harry wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "Don't even think about him. He's not worth your tears."

Hermione nodded and dabbed at the corner of her eyes. "It's just that as of late, everything makes me cry. I'm hoping that it won't last the rest of my pregnancy. The morning sickness is gone, but now I'm feeling cravings. In particular for donuts."

Ron grinned. "I like donuts. Lav always keeps a dozen for me so that I can have them with coffee. Why don't we make a pit stop at the bakery by your flat?"

"Come on, Mione. The night is still young," said Harry as they pulled her along.

And she smiled. She loved Harry and Ron so much, she didn't know what she would've done without them. They would continue to be her solace now that she didn't have Draco anymore. Now that he belonged to someone else. Her children would be her strength to overcome anything.

For the first time in his life—more like her life—Draco was willingly holding his baby sister in his arms. He'd held her before, but always because his mother had forced her into his unwilling arms. As the girl looked at him with bright blue eyes instead of the customary Malfoy-gray, she smiled. And he smiled back at her.

In just a few months, he would become the father of two babies with his ex-wife; he needed to practice if he wanted to accomplish being a good father. He would not be like Lucius, who had never taken the time to actually care for him when he had been a tot. At least not the way he had done with the little creature in his arms. Maybe it was because she was a girl. Maybe not. Draco didn't care anymore. Those feelings of resentment had faded away after the war.

Now, as he looked at the girl again, he wondered who the twins would look like. Would they grow up to become Slytherins or Gryffindors? Maybe a blond, brown-eyed Gryffindor, and a brunette, gray-eyed Slytherin? The possibilities were endless. Maybe they wouldn't even go to those houses and they would end up in Ravenclaw. He shuddered. He hoped not. Even Gryffindor would be better than Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw.

Draco stood from his seat out in the garden and hoisted little Darlene against his shoulder, noting the way she smelled like baby and powder. Even though he had gone to Hermione's appointments, which were more frequent than a normal pregnancy, their contact was kept to a minimum. They only talked about the babies and soon after the appointments were over, she would leave without another word. He wouldn't see her until every few weeks.

"What can I do to get her back?" he muttered to Darlene, who was sucking her thumb. In a few months she would be one, and he knew that Lucius would want her to get rid of that bad habit soon. "I want her to be with me again, but I was such an idiot to her," he murmured. Darlene merely looked at him and shrieked in happiness when her eyes landed on her father.

"Seeking answers from an infant?" asked Lucius as he took the girl in his arms and gave her a squeeze.

Draco shrugged. "She listens and doesn't judge me for my stupidity. She also doesn't give me any sarcasm. Yet," he said with a faint smirk.

"You want to get your wife back?" Lucius asked quietly.

His son nodded. "I just don't know how to go about fixing things. I screwed up, and even if I told her that I loved her, I don't think she would believe me now," said Draco with a heavy sigh.

Lucius grunted and pulled his hair out of his daughter's grip. "Maybe you should do something for her. I can't tell you what, but women are very susceptible during their pregnancies. Maybe you can do something for her that will let her see that you are serious at getting back with her."

"She won't even talk to me outside of her appointments. How am I going to get her to listen?" snapped Draco.

"Enough with the whining. If you don't do anything at all, things may get worse and it'll be too late. Just find a way to make her listen. Take the angle of the children and work from there," said Lucius before turning and walking off to find his wife.

Draco sighed heavily and mulled things over. What could he do for her that would make her see that he loved her? He had a lot of thinking to do and he had a lot of work to get done.

Work was hell.

Okay, so maybe she was being melodramatic. But still, why was it that all these creatures suddenly decided to fall into large ditches, or get into fights over a female, or decide to breathe fire on each other? For the past week, she and Neville had been working on their healing potions nonstop. There had been little time for research and they had just recently been asked to work on some essays that would be published in a book that had to do with healing magical creatures. It was a great honor, but it sucked royally to be expected to complete their writings while all the animals in the country decided to get into some medical trouble.

Add to that the fact that she was six months pregnant—with twins—mix in her hormones, her cravings, and her heightened sense of smell, and it was a recipe for disaster. She had been feeling really tired as of late, and her head was killing her. Neville could see it, but had wisely desisted from getting her to stay home for a few days. There was just too much work to get done and he couldn't do it by himself. She should really start to look for someone else to work with them for extra help, and then to take over once she went on leave when it was time for the twins to be born.

Neville stepped into her office and grinned. "I think we're done!" he said excitedly. "We've replenished the potions and the patients' numbers have gone down considerably. I think we can finally take a break."

Hermione nodded and took a sip of her tropical smoothie. "The twins have been giving me a hard time," she commented, rubbing her growing stomach. She smiled when two different bumps rose. One, she suspected was an elbow from twin one, and the other was a knee, from twin two. Even though Harry scoffed at her, she knew who was who. A mother always knew. And she knew that because she'd met other mother's of twins. Some of them had identical—like Molly, who was acting like a soon-to-be grandmother—while others usually had a boy and a girl. She already knew what the babies were, but she was keeping it top secret. Not even Draco knew.

Her thoughts moved to Draco again. The way they usually did whenever she had any spare time. She hated the fact that she always had spare time to think about her ex-husband. He'd been seen with Daphne a few times and Rita Skeeter always had a field day when that happened. The old beetle didn't know when to quit and loved rubbing it in Hermione's face whenever she could. She always had to mention something about her in her articles.

As for herself, her pregnancy had been big news. Especially after the divorce. There had been speculation that she had cheated on Draco with Harry, because they had found out that she was living with him, and that the twins were his and that was why she and Draco had divorced. But Draco, being the hero—and Hermione scoffed whenever she thought about it—had cleared everything up after getting her consent, and had officially told the press that the twins were his, and that yes, they were going to raise them together and in harmony. Pffft. She made a face and didn't miss Neville's amused look.

"Miss Hermione?" asked the girl from the front desk, knocking her door.

"Yes?"

"There is someone here to see you. He said to tell you that he is an old friend," she said with a slight frown.

Hmm, Harry and Ron didn't need to be announced; that ruled them out. "Okay, Kiera. Let him

in." The girl nodded and left. "Stay with me, Nev. It sounds mighty suspicious to not give their name."

"Sure," he said, grabbing his own smoothie and taking a seat on the couch by the door.

The person who walked in made her always choke on her own breath. Cormac recently-divorced-McLaggen. Would he ever give up? "Hello, Cormac," she said rather flatly.

"Hermione. You're looking beautiful today," he said smoothly, handing her a large arrangement of red roses.

She had to admit that she was flattered, even though she knew that having a swollen stomach, which carried the offspring of your mortal enemy, was not very appealing to many men. "Thank you. What can I do for you?" she asked with a smile.

Cormac looked at Neville and narrowed his eyes in an intimidating manner. Hermione frowned. "Do you think we can talk? Alone?"

Hermione shook her head. "I'm sorry, Cormac. But Neville and I have a lot of work to do. Our break is over and we have some essays to work on that will be published in a book," she said, trying to sound guilty.

"Well, I'll just get right down to the point then," he said with a sigh.

"And that is?" she asked as she shuffled some random papers.

"I would really enjoy it if you would join me for dinner some time soon?" he asked with an easy smile.

Hermione stared at him. "You are aware that I'm pregnant right?"

"Yes."

"With Draco's twins."

"Yes."

"You don't care?" she asked skeptically.

"No. You're not taken anymore. Your children are important, yes, but you're not tied down anymore. I'm not either. I just want us to go out as friends, and maybe we can see if there can ever be anything between us," he said quietly.

Hermione stared. This was a new tactic. It had to be. Cormac McLaggen had always been the same asshole he had been during school. Why was he acting like this all of a sudden? She was at a loss for words. "Uh..." she said stupidly.

"You don't have to answer me now. I'm aware that your only focus should be your kids, but don't close yourself off. Malfoy isn't the only man out there," he said with an easy grin.

Neville looked as if he were choking on his drink when he pointed towards the door and her

eyes moved. She blinked a few times and wondered if she was hallucinating. Was hallucination a pregnancy side effect? She swallowed hard as her eyes met Draco's; apparently, he had heard Cormac's words, and there were faint spots of color on his cheeks. McLaggen turned to look behind him and smirked when he saw the look on Malfoy's face. "Owl me when you make a decision," he said before standing and placing a kiss on her hand.

Hermione blinked and tried to get her brain to start moving forward again. She set the flowers on an empty spot on her desk and turned to look at Draco as Cormac passed him and they brushed shoulders far rougher than necessary. She rolled her eyes and Neville stepped over to her. "I'll put have Kiera find a vase so that she can put them in water for you," he said as he grabbed the roses and left her alone with Draco.

"Does he visit you often?" he asked her stiffly, his hands clenched.

She shook her head. "No. This is the first time I see him since we last bump into him and his ex-wife in Venice..... Now, what can I help you with?" she asked, setting her hands on the underside of her stomach.

"I came over to see if you would join me for lunch," he said quietly.

"Why?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

He gave her an annoyed look. "Because I want things to change between us, Granger. You're the mother of my children and I don't want to have this cold, distant relationship with you if we're going to succeed in raising the twins correctly. I—I don't want to screw up in this," he said impatiently.

She stared again. Aside from the fact that he was a sight for sore eyes, those words were probably the smartest ones that had ever come out of his mouth. He was right. Even though it would hurt her to be so close to him and not be able to touch him or kiss him, they had to make things work for the sake of their children. She sighed and shook her head. "I can't leave the office," she said quietly. His face fell slightly and it made her heart jump in her chest. "But we can have lunch here, if you'd like."

He raised an eyebrow and offered her a crooked smile. "Are you in the mood for something in particular?"

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know. The twins usually decide what they want me to eat, but I'm not getting any indications right now," she said with a smile. "But I'm in the mood for some Italian food."

"Then we'll order and we'll eat here," he said before walking towards the hearth that was on the opposite side of the couch and was used as her private floo network.

She watched him and felt a bit lighthearted as he offered her a wink while he placed their orders. "Oh, and get something for Nev, please! He told me that he was going to stay in for lunch and that he hadn't brought anything in for himself."

Draco nodded and placed an extra order of Fettuccini Alfredo. As they waited for the ten minutes that it would take for the food to be delivered, he sat down in front of her and they stared at each other for a few seconds before she looked away. "We need to start planning on

how we're going to raise the twins. I've always liked to plan ahead, so this is as good a time as any," she said, standing up and stretching her aching back.

Draco held out his hand and waited for her to take it. She looked at it for a moment, hesitant and unsure, but then slid her warm hand into his. He pulled her over and ran a careful hand over the stretched skin of her stomach, feeling the movement inside and letting a smile come over his features.

Hermione looked down at him and felt her heart thudding in her chest. Why was she feeling this way now? It was such an intimate moment between him and their children; it had nothing to do with her. But then he raised his face and looked up at her, his gray eyes open and shining. His other hand was still holding hers.

"I'm sorry," he murmured.

"For what?" she asked, wishing against her own mind that he was talking about ending their marriage and throwing everything away.

"For not telling you that I loved you when I should have," Draco said seriously.

Her breath hitched and she pulled her hand out of his. "What?" she breathed.

"I was stupid for letting you go without telling you how I felt, but you have to understand that I believed those words that you swore at the beginning of our marriage; that you would always love Weasley and that nothing I could do would make you change your mind. Things were calm between us during the second year, but you always kept your distance. What was I supposed to do?" he asked, standing in front of her and keeping their eye contact.

"How about taking the time to actually talk to me about it?" Hermione asked darkly. "How could you possibly know what I was thinking? Are you psychic? Do you read minds?" she asked snidely. She felt short standing in front of him. Her flats were necessary for her aching feet, and they went with the outfit, but she had almost forgotten how tall Draco really was.

Draco scowled. "No," he bit out. "But you never bothered to talk to me either. I didn't really know if you still resented me. I couldn't talk to you about something so touchy as the reasons for our marriage? How was I going to ask you if you felt something even close to love for me?"

"Then I believe that one of our biggest mistakes in our marriage was the lack of communication," she said with a shrug. "What's your point? Why are you bringing this up now?" she asked, trying to ignore the fact that he had used the love word at the beginning of their conversation.

"I—I want to make things up to you," he said quietly.

"How?" she asked just as softly.

"I want you to know that I—"

"Miss Hermione, your food is here," Kiera said, knocking on her door.

Hermione let out the breath she hadn't even known she was holding before Draco walked

towards the door and paid for the food, asking the man to take the extra platter to Longbottom's office. He turned to look at her again and noticed that she had sat down and was going through some papers, dividing them and putting them into separate stacks.

"Here you go," Draco said, handing over her food and drink.

"Thank you," she said slowly, taking the food, but her appetite had been waning since her conversation with Draco had started. He started to eat while she pushed her food around for a bit. "I was thinking that once the twins are a few months old, you can take them on the weekends. So that you don't get overwhelmed, you can take one on Saturday and the other on Sunday."

"Only weekends?" he asked, not sounding convinced.

"Do you have any more time to dedicate to them?" she asked seriously. "Once they're older, they can spend more time, but not when they're babies."

"Well," Draco started, "I went to spend time with them both, at the same time..... and with you."

Hermione stared at him and shook her head. "That's not a good idea. What will Daphne think?" she asked, voice dripping with sarcasm and scorn.

He stopped chewing and gave her a strange look before swallowing and taking a sip of his drink. "You don't actually believe all the rubbish in the papers, do you?" he asked with a scoff.

She narrowed her eyes. "The papers don't matter much. I heard it from the woman herself. She didn't even know that I was pregnant. So, won't she flip-out or something? I mean, she is a basket case when it comes to you, so I am a little apprehensive about my children being around her," she said, finally trying her lasagna and salad.

Draco shook his head. "She and I are not involved, regardless of what she says. We go out to dinner, but that's it. There's no serious relationship and we're not even dating. We're friends. I go out with Pans just the same," he said with a one-shouldered shrug.

Hermione didn't know whether to believe him or not. "The pictures in the paper show something different."

"They're misleading," he snapped, putting down his knife and fork. "Can we not talk about this? She and I are not involved and that's the end of this. I don't want to see her, and I don't want to be with her. The only woman that matters to me at the moment is you, and it has been you for a while now," Draco said darkly.

"Don't do that," she said with a heavy sigh.

"Do what?"

"Make me think that you care about me and not only the twins," said Hermione, her eyes looking suspiciously glassy. "I can't deal with that right now."

"But I do care about you," Draco muttered, he dabbed at his mouth with a napkin and stood, walking over to kneel in front of her. "That's what I really wanted to say to you today, and I was

a bit surprised that you actually accepted to have lunch with me because you've wanted me to keep my distance."

She shook her head and looked away from him. "But you threw everything away so easily."

"And I'm sorry," he stressed. "I was stupid, and I may have screwed things up too much for you to forgive me, but I want a chance to do things right this time. I... love you too much to give up on us anymore. I miss you."

Hermione swallowed hard and couldn't hold down the tears that had built up in her eyes at his words. She stood and moved away from him, swiping the tears from her face and trying to keep from sobbing. "How can I trust what you're saying to me?" she murmured.

Draco walked over to her and took her hand in his once again, touching her skin gently. "I don't know. That's up to you whether you want to trust me again, and I really want you to."

"I'm sorry." She shook her head.

His heart plummeted to his feet and he felt numb all over. "Why?"

Hermione touched his cheek. "I need time. I just... I just need to think things through. I can't make a decision now. I won't walk into this blindly again because I went to make a decision that will be good not only for me, but for our children. Please understand," she pleaded.

Draco nodded and let out a heavy sigh. "I do. Though I may not like it, I do. Just, don't take too long."

"Well, you know me. I like to think things through more than once, and I'll analyze it from every possible angle," she said, trying for a small joke.

"You're such a nerd, Granger," he said fondly.

She didn't question where he had gotten the word 'nerd' from. "We'll work something out, Malfoy. Even if I can't bring myself to trust you again, we can work something out. If only for the sake of the twins," she replied sadly. She stopped talking when she felt her vision tilt.

"What's wrong?" he asked her, taking a hold of her arms as she almost stumbled. "Hermione? What the hell?" he asked as he held her up and eased her into a chair.

"I'm okay," she muttered, trying to calm her erratic breathing.

"No, you're not," he snapped. "Has this happened before? Are the twins okay?"

Hermione nodded and swatted at his hands as they touched her forehead and then her cheeks. "I just got a dizzy spell. The twins are fine, I can feel them kicking each other," she said with a faint smile, her vision slowly returning to normal.

"Come on," he said, pulling her to her feet and wrapping an arm around her waist to help her to the door.

"What? No!" she yelled, trying to push him away, but it appeared that the lightheadedness was

still there and she had to grab onto his arm to not fall over. "Okay, fine. Where are we going?" she snapped.

"To the Manor," he said, helping her towards the apparition point. As they passed the girl at the desk, she gave her instructions about some papers on her desk and what to tell Neville. "Forget all the rubbish she just said. She's going to be seen by a healer because she just had a strange episode and we're worried about her health and the twins' health."

The girl only nodded worriedly and watched them go before she ran towards Neville's office.

Draco helped Hermione onto the bed they had shared during their marriage after apparating them there. She laid down and rubbed a hand over her face as she toed off her shoes. After nagging at him that he was overreacting, Hermione accepted to see a healer. She checked everything regarding the twins and asked Hermione many questions about how she had spent her week.

"Is something wrong with her or the children?" Draco asked impatiently.

The woman smiled and shook her head. "No, but I'm afraid that you really need to cut back on work, Hermione. From what you told me, you overworked yourself this week and that is dangerous for you and the twins. I'm going to have to make this mandatory."

Hermione scowled. "I can't leave Neville with all the work now!" she whined.

The healer gave her a stern look and decided to go harsh. "Okay. Then pick between the safety of your children or your job," she said as gently as she could.

Her words had the desired effect and the pregnant woman nodded reluctantly. "Fine. But, you mean to tell me that I can go to work at all?" Hermione asked.

The healer shook her head. "It's best if you take care of simple paperwork from home, if that's possible."

"It is," said Draco before Hermione could say anything. "Don't give me that look, Granger. Have Longbottom hire five other people if you have to. Besides, you're the boss and you're pregnant, so you can get away with it."

"Well, please take it easy, Hermione. I will see you at your next appointment and we'll see if you've gotten any better. Remember, no stress, no work, and you'll be okay."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you," she said before the healer left. She turned to Draco, who was scowling at her. "What?" she snapped.

"Did you see I wasn't exaggerating when I said that I didn't want you living alone with Potter and exerting yourself when you didn't have to?"

Hermione just crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not used to being waited on. I'm not like you, rich boy."

"Well, you certainly have the money. But from what my accountant has told me, you haven't touched a single knut," he said in annoyance.

She raised an eyebrow at him. "And I told you I wouldn't. Now, get me some parchment and a quill, please. I need to write some things that will help him along, and I really need you to go get my essay for me. I'm close to finishing it," she said with a pleading note in her voice.

Draco rolled his eyes. "On one condition," he said seriously.

"Which is?" she asked impatiently.

"I want you to stay here during the rest of your pregnancy. Just let me do this for you," he said seriously.

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think that's a good idea."

Draco sat on the bed and placed a hand against her cheek, his eyes open and pleading again. "Please, do this for me. Let me take care of you," he whispered, his lips inching towards hers.

She felt her breath stop as their lips met gently. Sweet Merlin, she had missed this so much. But it didn't last long. He pulled away shortly and held her eyes in his. Why, Merling, why? "Fine," she muttered as her resolve crumbled. She didn't miss the way his eyes changed and he smiled slightly. "Harry and Ron are going to murder us both."

Draco snorted. "They can try," he said before walking out to get some tea for her and the parchment and quill she had asked for. It didn't matter what those two idiots tried. He would take them both again if he had to because Hermione was worth it. Besides, now that she would be living there with him, he'd have a better chance at convincing her to accept him again. The deities were taking pity on him and were giving him a ray of hope in his bleak life.

He was highly aware that he was being dramatic, but it didn't matter. Hermione was here and he had a chance to make her see that he loved her, and maybe he would get to hear her say it back to him some time soon.

Woo-hoo! We're finally going somewhere! Sorry it took me so long to get this chapter out, but there was a lot I had to get done. First of all, I got this review from someone that stated their disappointment in the lack of romance and how I was handling Draco and Hermione's relationship. It rattled me and I changed some things from the outline I've had written for months already. She was right. This fic has been a bit cold regarding the romance, and to please everyone and myself, I decided to change things a bit. Hermione is being more lenient and I'm giving you guys what you've wanted, since it appears that all that there's been is angst and drama. I know, I was asking myself, where is the romance? So here it is, and the next chapter will have a little more. Besides, the twins are coming up in the next chapter too.

Thanks everyone so much for taking the time to read and to review. You all make me want to be better and just hearing your opinions makes me happy. You see? I do listen to you all! Well, have a great weekend everyone! And for those of you who send info regarding twins, thank you so much; it was greatly appreciated.

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 16: The 'L' Word

Will I ever understand?

Hermione was getting ready to start crying. No, she wasn't mulling over her love life, or lack thereof, or the fact that Harry and Ron were mad at her because she had decided to live at the Manor again, which she was already regretting. No, she wanted to cry because she needed to get some work done and Draco was being an idiot. Neville had sent her the papers she had needed and their essays had been accepted. They would print the book and sell it by the time the twins were born. But other than that, he wouldn't let her work. She had yelled, ranted, and spat at him, but nothing seemed to work. Her new tactic was whining. Stupid Malfoy.

But... something occurred to her. Since when did she listen to anything Malfoy tried to say? He wasn't the boss of her! She scoffed to herself and grabbed a quill and some parchment to write on. He wasn't going to take away something she loved, and Hermione loved her job. Besides, the healer had said that she could do paperwork. Maybe Neville would agree to come over one or two hours a day so that they could use the Malfoy's library for resources.

"Miss Hermione?" asked an elf from the doorway.

She looked up from the letter and smiled. "Yes?"

"A Mr. Ronald Weasley is here to see you. He is waiting in the sitting room," said the elf.

"Oh, thank you. Do me a favor and send this letter with an owl to Neville Longbottom and also, please send some juice and cookies to Ron and me. Thank you," she said as she stood with a bit of difficulty from the chair she had been occupying. She just hoped Ron hadn't come over to yell at her. She'd been crying even more than usual as of late and she didn't want a repeat of past episodes.

Only last night she had burst into tears over something Lucius had said about the twins growing bigger every day inside her. She felt like he had implied that she was fat. And it was true, her stomach was huge, but he didn't need to point out the obvious. Especially when she was so sensitive to everything around her. As she made it downstairs with only slight fatigue, she spotted Ron pacing. As soon as he saw her, he stopped and stared.

"Geez Mione, you're huge!" he commented.

Instead of tears sprouting to her eyes, anger reared its head. "Well, thanks for pointing that out you nitwit. I just so happen to be carrying two babies instead of one, so it's natural for me to be this big," she snapped.

Ron looked visibly embarrassed. "Sorry. I guess you weren't expecting me to say that," he muttered. "Come here Mione."

She walked over slowly and crossed her arms over the bump of her stomach. "How can I help you?" she asked, trying to sound polite.

"Harry is still peeved at the fact that you came back here after all the shit Malfoy put you through, but I'm not. I mean, he's got the money to take care of you, why not just let him? I'm here to say... sorry for overreacting. Though I still hate him for what he did to us, he wants to take care of you and the twins and that's what's important," he muttered.

Hermione smiled and hugged him, feeling tears brim at her eyes. Ron patted her back gently and frowned when he heard her sniffing. "You okay?" he asked her, guiding her to the sofa.

She nodded. "I just missed you guys. Tell Harry that I'm sorry but I have to consider what's best for my twins. I'm so thankful that he helped me when I needed it the most, but I'm not the only person I need to think about now," she said as they sat down. Ron sat close to her and leaned back, letting her lean with him and place her head against his shoulder.

Ron let out a heavy sigh and kissed her forehead. "It's so strange," he murmured.

"What is?" she asked with a small smile.

"That we've come so far in so little time. I thought that I would pine for you until my dying day. Don't get me wrong, it still hurts when I think of the life we could've had together but that was denied to us. But... I'm happy, Mione. I love my son and I love Lav. She helped me when I needed it the most, even though mum was being difficult with her."

Hermione smiled and squeezed his hand. "Never thought we would end up with different people, huh?" she asked. "I always thought we would get married and have kids together. But, in spite of all that's happened with Draco, he's given me the best gift a woman can have. I was so scared at first, but now I know that he'll do his best to be a good father to the twins. He wants to be a part of their lives and... of mine," she said slowly.

Ron grunted. "The most important thing is, do you want to be with him again? If you love him, and he loves you, why are you putting yourself through all this? I'll hate Malfoy to my dying day, but if he made you happy the time you were together, why don't you just forgive him and get together again?"

Hermione rubbed her stomach to ease some of the kicks from the twins. Technically, if the twins reached their entire gestation, she was due next month. But her healer had warned her that it was more than likely that they would be born a few weeks earlier. Most twins were, so she would most likely be going into labor any day now. It scared her to death that they would be out too early, but so far they were healthy and at a good weight to survive being born this early. "Feel this," she muttered, taking Ron's hand and placing it on her stomach. He grinned when he felt the separate kicks from inside. "The healer told me that they can be born any day now, so I have to focus on relaxing. They need to stay in there as long as possible. I can't get into anything with Draco right now because anything that has to do with him usually involves a lot of stress," she said with a faint smile.

"But... what are you going to do after the twins are born?" he asked curiously.

Hermione grimaced as a foot crammed against her ribs. "I'm going to get my own flat. Merlin knows Harry won't be able to handle all the crying in the middle of the night, and my mum is going to move in with me to help take care of them. I'll probably just stay here until I'm a bit recovered from the labor and I get used to being around the twins. It's a bit scary to think that

I'm going to be responsible for two tiny beings that will need me for eighteen or more years."

Ron nodded. "I know the feeling," he said, trailing off with a laugh. "Roan is a handful. He knows exactly how to cry when he wants to be picked up from his crib. Lav spoils him too much and the brat knows he can get away with anything."

Hermione grinned and looked up when someone entered the room. Her grin widened and she would've stood up, but she couldn't quite make it. "Blaise!" she exclaimed happily.

"Don't get up sweetheart," he said, sitting on her other side and hugging her tightly. "Goodness, look at you."

"I know. I'm huge. You can thank these two," she said, rubbing her stomach.

"You're still beautiful," he complimented and Hermione fluttered her lashes at him playfully.

"Hey, aren't you still my sister's boyfriend?" Ron asked darkly.

Blaise grinned. "Of course, and she knows I'm here but she had to stay at work. She sends you her love. We're sorry we haven't been able to visit but we were out of town for a few months," he explained to Hermione.

"Where were you?" Hermione asked.

"We went to New York for a job and we stayed for a short vacation. She wanted to be back in time to be with you these next few days and to see the twins when they come into this world," he said, patting her stomach. "How are the boys?" he asked smugly.

"They aren't boys," said Ron from her other side.

"Hermione isn't telling, but I know that they're going to be boys," he said, sounding sure of himself.

"It's a boy and a girl," Ron countered. Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Care to wager on that?" asked Blaise.

"You're on!" Ron exclaimed; they shook hands right in front of her face.

"Hey!" Hermione complained. "The least you can do is bet on my twins without me knowing. But I'm not going to tell you. One of you is right, but you won't know who until the twins are born."

"We'll discuss what we're going to wager later, when Mione is out of earshot," Ron said.

Blaise nodded and took out his wand before waving it and producing a big box that was beautifully wrapped with silver tissue paper and tiny bears hugging each other every few seconds. "We found this in New York and thought of you," he said with a smile.

"You're both going to have to help me here," Hermione said as she tried sitting a little straighter and Ron helped place two cushions at her back. Blaise moved the gift onto her lap and held it while she unwrapped it, trying not to tear the pretty paper too much.

She gasped when she saw what was inside. It was a big basket filled with things for two babies, in blue and beautifully set up. There were blankets, body suits, booties, little hats, and burping cloths. Upon closer inspection, she found that even though the clothing looked to be the same, they had different design to help distinguish the twins. "The clothing has a charm that will sew the name of the baby into the clothes once you know what you're going to name them. That way people who visit will know who they're holding. I know you said something about them not being identical, but you never know, especially if they're both boys," he said matter-of-factly.

"One is a girl," Ron muttered.

"You keep thinking that," Blaise replied.

Hermione snickered. "What if it turns out that one is a girl?" she asked as she touched the clothing and felt the soft material.

Blaise shrugged. "Even though I'm rooting for two boys, if there's a girl, there's also a charm to change the color to pink."

She smiled and hugged him as best she could. "Thank you so much. The gift is beautiful. Tell Gin that I really appreciate it and that I can't wait for her to come visit me. Draco is being an ass and he doesn't want to let me out of the house. I want to check on the trauma center, but he won't let me."

"Have you two made up yet? This situation is getting plain silly," Blaise said as he kept rubbing her stomach in soothing circles. Hermione felt the twins calm and realized they were probably sleeping.

She shrugged. "We never were the most mature people when we were young. I guess it followed us into adulthood. But no, he and I speak strictly about the twins only. He may have been the first to admit that he loved me, but I don't think I'm ready to place my trust in him again. He has to earn it."

Ron and Blaise's eyebrows shot up. "He said the 'L' word first?" the dark haired man asked in shock.

Hermione nodded. "We're kind of in limbo right now. He put himself out there, but I don't know what to do. Half of me wants us to be together again, while the other half is telling me to keep my distance because he will only hurt me again. I don't know what to do."

"You should just wait for the babies to be born," said Ron, patting her hand. "Once they're here, you'll do what's best for them."

"Ron is right," Blaise murmured, ignoring the smug look on the red-head's face. "All you have to focus on now is relaxing and making sure that the twins are healthy, all right?"

Hermione nodded and smiled; at least two men in her life have proved that they had a brain in that head. What would she do without them? "Can you both stay for lunch? I get kind of lonely sometimes. Narcissa has lunch with me almost every day, but she's not here today and the healer ordered me to stay off my feet, so I can't really go out anywhere."

"I would love to stay," said Blaise with a smile.

"Me too," Ron piped in. "What are we having?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. He was the same Ron she knew and loved. Always thinking with his stomach. "Help me up from this couch and we can go see what the elves are cooking, and don't give me that look. I'm allowed to walk around the house as long as I don't stay on my feet for too long," she said as she pulled the other two men along.

They visited the elves and took in the wonderful smell of food as they cooked some type of chicken with spices Hermione had never even heard of. They were ushered out and the food was served shortly after, but before they sat down to eat, the sound of the door to the floo room opening caught their attention. Neville walked in with a nervous smile on his face. "Hey Nev, what are you doing here?" Hermione asked. "Do you want to have lunch with us?"

"I think I'm too nervous for lunch," he said with a grin. "But thank you for offering. I know that you're supposed to be calm and all because of the babies, but I just the most exciting news!" he exclaimed.

Hermione gave him a look. "What news?" she asked curiously.

"The trauma center is going to receive an award for all the great work that has been accomplished in such a short time. Thanks to you, we're the top researchers in the country, Hermione, and they want to recognize your work with an award with a ceremony and all that."

"Who is?" Blaise asked.

"The Ministry of Magic, but not just ours, others from around the country will be there too, and offers of funding had been pouring in," Neville said happily.

Hermione stood and hugged him as best she could. "Oh, Nev, that's wonderful!" she exclaimed as he gave her a squeeze. "When is the ceremony?"

"Next month," he said, his smile fading a little. "I told them that there would be a great possibility that you wouldn't be able to attend because of the babies, but these people said that they can't postpone such an event. Apparently, they are busy people and they have been planning this for a couple of weeks now."

Hermione shrugged but kept her smile on her face. "You'll go in my place. Nev, the trauma center has turned into what it is because of you and all the other people who work with us. I'd be honored if you went in my place."

Neville smiled but paled. "D-does that mean that I have to give a speech in front of people?" he asked her.

Ron stood and slapped him on the back. "Good luck, Neville. We'll be rooting for you. We have faith in you and we know you'll make a great speech."

Neville laughed nervously. "Y-yeah, I'll try my best," he said, still not believing that Hermione was going to leave him to take the reigns of the trauma center while she had her kids. He'd been trying to come to terms for the last few months, but he still was getting used to it.

"Sit down and have lunch, Nev. Then we'll all go visit the trauma center, unless you two can't go," she said to Ron and Blaise.

"Shouldn't you stay off your feet?" asked Ron sternly.

"Come on, I just want to get some fresh air and check on my trauma center. It won't take long!" she whined. She gave them all the puppy-dog look she hadn't used since she had been fifteen.

"Do all women have that look?" Blaise muttered.

"Yes," Ron and Neville said in unison.

"Great, then it's settled. We'll all go. Nothing will go wrong if you guys are there with me. Trust me!" she said brightly. The men just looked at each other and offered no comment.

"Won't take long my arse," Ron said under his breath as they all looked into the creature nursery. There was a group of baby Nifflers with their mother in a big pen with a warming spell surrounding it.

"Aren't they cute?" Hermione asked with a smile.

"Incredibly," said Blaise in a flat tone. "I thought you said your visit would be short. We've been here for two hours, Hermione, and what's worse, you refuse to sit down. If our dear Malfoy finds out, he'll have our heads on his wall after he hunts us down, yours included."

"He can try," said Hermione with a smirk. "But I'll take him down before he even raises his wand," she said smugly. "Besides, I'm not tired. I feel so full of energy now that I see this place after being gone so long." As soon as she had finished the sentence, she tensed and gripped Ron's arm.

He looked at her and frowned. "You okay?" he asked her.

"Yes, but I think I need to sit down now," Hermione replied as they guided her out of the nursery and walked her to some chairs placed in the hallway. As she was sitting down, she tensed again and laid a hand on her stomach. Something was most definitely wrong. It didn't hurt, but she was starting to feel discomfort and her stomach was incredibly hard.

Ron touched her stomach and frowned, remembering Lav's symptoms when she had gone into labor. He paled and forced her to meet his eyes. "You think you're going into labor?"

She felt a jolt of pain and nodded. "Damn it, yes. They aren't due for another three weeks, almost four," she moaned in pain. "I need to get to St. Mungos. They need to check me and to see if these aren't false labor pains, though they feel pretty real to me," she muttered as Ron and Blaise helped her to her feet and walked her to the floo.

Blaise went first, then Hermione followed, and finally Ron. They walked her to the desk and the woman directed them to the correct section of the hospital. The healer who always saw her was on her day off, but would be coming in soon to take care of her, but meanwhile another healer checked her and let her know that this was the real thing. Those were not false labor pains.

Ron and Blaise stepped into the room and gave her a smile once the healer had left. She was sitting on the bed, her hands digging into the sheets. "I'm not ready," she gasped, laying back onto the bed. "It's too soon and I'm not ready. I've been thinking about this day for a while now, and I'm not ready. I thought I was," she said, a few tears trailing down her face.

"We're here for you, Mione," said Ron, kissing her knuckles. "Harry and Malfoy are on their way. Zabini sent them both an owl. Just focus on the twins and don't think about anything else. You can worry after they're born because right now they need you to help bring them into this world," he murmured gently.

Hermione nodded and let out a shaky breath. "Okay," she said, voice a bit breathy with the pain. "Thanks. I needed someone to tell me that."

"That's what I'm here for," Ron said with a grin.

"And I'll take over when Weasley runs out of things to say to you," Blaise put in, making her laugh despite the pain.

"Draco is going to flip out, and I'm not exactly in a comfort zone here. Just, try to keep him at bay unless you all want me to get off this bed to curse him to hell. I don't need my wand to curse him if I'm angry enough," Hermione said before letting out a deep breath.

"I'll go wait for him outside then," Blaise said before pressing a kiss to her temple and walking out.

Blaise sat outside for a while. Potter walked in and had some type of reunion with Hermione. When he had gone in to check on her, Potter was pacing nervously, while Weasley was sitting on the only chair reading a magazine. He had to admire their friendship because even though Potter looked as if he would pass out at any moment, he was comforting her, talking to her to get her mind off of the pain.

Draco arrived about five minutes later. He was paler than usual and he looked even more nervous than Potter. "How is she?" he asked.

Blaise shook his head. "She's fine. In her room, trying not to freak out Potter. If you ask me, he looks pretty green. Much the same way you do. Look, I understand that this must be a big moment for you and Hermione, but if you hurl on these dragonhide boots, so help me, I will skin you alive," said Blaise patting him on the shoulder.

Draco smirked. "Limited edition, aren't they? Only you could be so worried about some ugly boots while my ex-wife is in there, getting ready to have my children," he muttered. "How did you know she went into labor? Did she call you and the other two before she called me?" he asked darkly.

Blaise debated on whether or not to tell him about their excursion to the trauma center. He voted not to. "No, she didn't call us. Weasley and I were visiting her at the Manor. I owed you and Potter once we were here," he replied, leaving out that one important detail as to where she had been when she had gone into labor.

"I need to go see her," Draco said with a sigh.

"Hey," Blaise called as his friend reached the door. "Whatever she tells you, remember, she needs you to be her strength. Don't crowd her or agitate her. She's about to make you a full-fledged father of twin boys."

"Boys?" Draco asked. "How do you know they're boys?"

Blaise shrugged. "She won't tell me if I'm right, but my gut instinct is telling me that she's having boys."

The blond just smirked and stepped into the room. Weasley and Potter gave him looks full of derision and promises of worlds of hurt if he made Hermione angry or sad. He looked at her next and gave her a look over. Even in her pain and with her wild, bushy hair, she was beautiful. "Can you give us a moment?" he asked the two other men.

They looked at Hermione and she nodded. "Thank you so much for being here," she said with a smile.

"We'll be here until the twins are born," Harry said with a grin. "We wouldn't miss seeing them for the first time before anyone else."

"Thank you," she said again. "Oh, and please contact my mother. If either one of you can bring her over here, I would really appreciate it."

They nodded and walked out of the room, shutting the door behind them. Draco turned to look at her and smiled. "We need to talk," he said quietly.

"About what?" she asked as a contraction hit her. A gasp slipped from her lips and he was at her side in a second. "It's passing," she said. "They're not to close together yet, and the healer says that it can take a few hours for be to be fully ready."

Draco nodded and stroked the skin of her stomach gently. "I'll be here the entire time, but I want to know something. Now, before they're born." She nodded and he spoke. "How long will you stay at the Manor after having the twins?"

"I don't know. I just need to adjust to them before I move out on my own. I'm planning on getting a flat. My mother will come live with me to help take care of the babies," she said quickly.

His eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't want you to leave."

"We aren't married anymore, Draco. Things won't work out if I live with you permanently. I know that you don't want to be away from them, but I need my space. I can't be so close to you and..." Hermione trailed off and looked away from him.

"And what?" he asked, sitting on the bed next to her. "Tell me."

She shook her head. "There are things that are better left unsaid."

"Why can't you just trust me again? Merlin, Hermione. I want you to be my wife again, but you're too damned stubborn to see it. I want us to be a happy family, and I know we can do it, but only if you let go of the past."

"It's not as easy as you make it sound," she snapped, finally getting angry. Another pain hit her and she closed her eyes as she tried to ride it out. "I can't just say, 'oh yes Draco, I love you too. Let's forget about the blackmail, and the fact that you kicked me out of your life without even asking me what I felt. Let's forget about you and Greengrass too. We'll be a happy family and nothing will ever come between us.' Is that what you want?"

"You make it sound like it's something impossible he snapped back. I know that you will always remember what I did to you, but you said that you needed time. How much more time do you need to decide if you want to be with me again?" he asked in exasperation.

Hermione bit her lip in pain and felt like hurling the pitcher of water at his head. Here she was in pain, trying to give birth to his kids and he was being a jerk about everything. "Can we have this conversation later?" she almost yelled.

"What? You mean when the twins turn eighteen or when they're about to marry other people?" he asked petulantly.

"You are such an asshole, Draco Malfoy," she spat. "I'm in pain here, and all you can think about is yourself. I need bloody fucking time to think about giving you a chance. But if it'll shut you up, I'll give it to you. After the twins are born, if you can prove to me that we can be happy, then I will be with you again. Meanwhile—" she trailed off into a moan of pain. Only then did she realize that her hand was in his, and it made her see that he was really there for her when she needed him the most.

"What?" he asked as her eyes opened and gazed into his.

"We'll have to start from the very beginning," she said with a wince as she tried to sit up a bit.

His pale eyes were slightly confused. "What does that mean exactly?"

"That means that you have to woo me," she said with a faint smirk. "Again. We will go out, and get to know each other again, and you will be patient because I will not give you the chance to play with me again. Then you'll be my boyfriend, and you will propose to me the way a man should. If you do it the right way, maybe, maybe I will be inclined to marry you again," Hermione said seriously.

Draco chuckled lightly and nodded. "Okay," he said, leaning forward to kiss her.

Hermione moved her face to the side and saw him frown. "We're barely getting to know each other, you can't just kiss me like that," she said flatly.

He rolled his eyes and pressed a chaste kiss to her lips. "I think those rules don't count when you're about to have my children," he stated matter-of-factly. "You're still going to move out?"

She nodded. "I've always been independent. You can't expect me to change now. But I'll stay for this first precious month of their lives. I want you to be there too. They'll need you as much as I will."

Draco smiled and nodded. "You are the most difficult person I have ever met."

"But you still love me despite that," she muttered.

"Yes. I do," Draco said, that smile still on his lips.

It out that the twins were born until five am the next morning. They weighed five pounds, almost six, and were pretty tiny. They looked like tiny house elves, Draco mused as he stared down at his two sons, who were sleeping in a bassinet big enough for the both of them. One had blond hair, the same shade of his, and the other had hair as dark as Hermione's. He had yet to see their eyes, but even though they reminded him of elves, they were beautiful because they were half his and half Hermione's.

She was currently sleeping, recovering after a particularly rough labor. But she had been strong all the way. If she had been in a lot of pain, she didn't show it much. She was the bravest woman he had ever seen or met. She deserved the rest she was getting. He walked out of the room and to the waiting room where Zabini, Potter, and Weasel were all asleep at odd angles. Draco smirked and kicked the three of them awake. "They're okay. All three of them," he said in a low voice.

"What did she have?" Ron asked, trying to rub the sleep from his eyes.

"Have you named them yet?" Blaise asked next.

"Darius and Darien are sleeping, as is Hermione..... Thank you... for being here," he muttered, not willing to say anymore.

"We're here for her," Harry said as he motioned to Ron and himself.

"Regardless. Even while she was in pain, she worried about all three of you out here, getting no sleep," he said the last with a hint of sarcasm. "If you want to see the twins, do it now while no medi-witches are around. These aren't visiting hours. Hermione is out cold so she won't even know you're there, but I'll tell her that you didn't get a wink of sleep out of worry for her."

Blaise rolled his eyes and slapped him on the back roughly. "You see? I told you she was having boys." He turned to Weasley. "I guess you lost the wager."

"What wager?" Draco asked darkly. "You were betting on my ex-wife and my sons?"

"Of course not," Ron said dryly, but he offered no more words before he and Potter walked to Hermione's room.

"Your dad came over yesterday evening. He said he and your mum would come over later today," his friend said. "What was it like? Seeing something like a child coming through her..." he shuddered.

Draco nodded. "Being squeezed, you mean. It was strangely a very meaningful moment, even though it was probably the creepiest thing I have ever seen," he said, looking slightly pale again at the memory. "She was strong all the way. She almost broke my hand, but we both survived this unscathed. I don't she'll want anymore kids in a very long time."

"Did you two work things out?" Blaise asked him.

Draco smirked and nodded once. "I have to date her again," he said in amusement. "She said that if I do it right, and propose to her the way I should, she'll be wife again soon."

"Congratulations, man," he said honestly. "She deserves to be happy, so..... just don't hurt her again," Blaise said before following the two other men. He was curious to see what the twins looked like.

Once they were gone, he sat with Darien in his arms, back in Hermione's room. This twin was the blond one, and he had been born second. He had also been the first one to start crying because he was hungry. They were both incredibly small, but Draco had no doubt that they would both grow into strong men. The healer had told him to keep him close and warm because even though they were healthy, they were still quite small and would have weaker defenses than other babies who reached the full forty weeks.

A medi-witch had brought over a bottle of formula and had showed him the proper way to feed him and how to burp him afterwards. Draco stood and placed the boy back into the self-warming bassinet after placing a gentle kiss against his tiny forehead. Then he picked up his other son and smiled. This one looked like Hermione, though she had insisted that they were too small to look like either of them yet. He opened his eyes and the smile widened. He had gray eyes.

He looked up and saw Hermione stir, before she blinked her eyes open in the dim room and smiled when she saw him holding their baby. "How are they?" she asked sleepily.

"Perfect," he replied, walking over to show her the boy. "I've just fed Darien and I'm getting ready to feed this guy," he said gently.

Hermione nodded. "Wish... I could feed... them," she said faintly. "Tired..."

"Get some sleep," he said, not even realizing that he hadn't gotten a wink of sleep himself. "I'll be with them until you wake up."

"Kay..." she said.

"I love you," he whispered to her.

"Love... too..." Hermione said so softly he had to strain to hear her.

Draco looked down at the boy in his arms, little Darius, and smirked. Mindful of the baby in his arms, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly freckled nose. Hermione loved him too. Could his life get any better?

Hehe, thanks guys. Your concerns and comments really move me. Just to clear something up, I really appreciate what you guys tell me, and it makes me strive to be a better writer. About what I said in the last chapter regarding the review I got, it bugged me because she was right and I knew it. It didn't get me down, or made me feel bad, it just made me realize that she was right and that I was forgetting all about the romance. Of course, Hermione is always going to play hard to get, so Draco is in for a bumpy ride, and no, he's not going to turn into some sappy

romance-filled guy. He's too Slytherin to wear his heart on his sleeve.

About the twins, I know it's highly unlikely that since she's been taking care of herself, that being on her feet for a long time brought on the labor, but I'm not a doctor and I don't have kids, so I can't really say for sure. But bear with me ladies and—if there are any—gentlemen. This is fanfiction, so I guess it could work that way in my universe, besides, I read that most twin pregnancies last 37 weeks on average, so it works for me. Also, I read that it's more common for a boy and a girl to be born as fraternal twins, and the least percentage is for two boys, but hey, it's Hermione and she's like a superhero in the HP world, right? So she gets two boys.

And about Mungos, I was at a bit of a loss because J.K. never mentions women having babies, so I was kind of vague as to what floor Herms would be on to have the twins. Anyway, thanks for reading and I hope that there aren't many objections to the names of the kids. I honestly looked for a while before I settled for those two names. I hope everyone enjoyed and have a great weekend!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 17: Lose Lose Situation

We built it up to watch it fall

Like we meant nothing at all

The first few days of caring for two newborns had been the biggest adventure Hermione had ever had. Half of it was amazing, while the other half was a nightmare. Two crying babies in the middle of the night wasn't her idea of fun. But it was a great experience, and having Draco at her side, sharing the suffering, made it all worth while. She had refused to have the house elves help her, so Draco had taken it upon himself to help out—even though he used his magic to clean the dirty diapers, and more than once had she caught him asleep instead of watching over the twins.

The twins slept in the nursery between her bedroom and Draco's, now that they were almost a month old. The first few days they had slept in bed with her, but Narcissa had advised her to teach them from an early age to sleep in their own beds. There had been nights though, that both Darius and Darien needed the companionship and the warmth, and she would bring them to her bed and watch over them as they slept. Hermione supposed that sharing the womb with another made it harder for them to be alone now.

It was so very interesting to see how different they were in physical appearance. Neither one of them had inherited her curls, but she supposed that there was still time to see if they would change and look more like her. Though she had come to love the fact that they both had Draco's eyes.

Narcissa and Lucius had sent out birth announcements as soon as Hermione had felt like herself and had been willing to pose in a magical picture while she held Darius and Draco held Darien. The media was camping out in front of the Manor and at any place they thought she would be in, but Hermione had no desire to leave the Manor just yet. The twins were still too

young and she was still feeling a tad exhausted from the labor and then the sleepless nights that had followed.

Harry and Ron had been by many times, both complaining about the twins looking too much like their mortal enemy. Harry had also told her that the flat next to his would be unoccupied in a matter of days and he had asked the owner to let her see it and let her have it if she wanted to live there. So tomorrow morning, she would be leaving the manner for the first time in a month. Hopefully she would be able to get some sleep.

"Are you sure that it's all right that you're missing work again?" Hermione asked Draco for the third time in an hour. She was becoming anxious at the thought of leaving the twins alone for the first time since they had been born.

He was sitting in the rocking chair of the nursery, feeding Darien as if nothing was amiss. He rolled his eyes at her and shook his head. "I told you that it's fine. That's why I have employees and someone who runs things when I can't make it," he said calmly. "Though I'm not exactly fond of the idea of not having the twins around night and day. Or you for that matter," he said almost absently.

Hermione smiled to herself and shook her head. "Dating will be easier this way. You'll get to pick me up and take me wherever you want," she said softly, her eyes drifting to Darius, who was sleeping peacefully in his crib.

"Anywhere I want?" Draco asked her with a raised eyebrow.

She rolled her eyes. "Anywhere means to dinner or to lunch, or even to see a play or any type of entertainment. I know what you were thinking and it'll be a long time before you can take me to your bedroom again," she said with a small laugh when he smirked. "Pervert," she muttered before pressing a kiss to the baby in his arms and running a gentle hand over the infant in the crib so as not to wake him. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Don't worry about the kids, they'll be fine," he said before she walked out the door. Just as she was making her way to the floo, Harry stepped out of the floo room and smiled.

"Ready to go?" he asked her.

Hermione nodded, letting out a deep breath. "Draco is with the twins right now. Let's go so that I can come back as soon as possible. I don't want to think about leaving my babies alone, and if I do, I'll start bawling and I won't leave the house for another month," she said, grabbing her purse and her coat before walking with him back towards the floo room.

They arrived at his apartment and Hermione's eyes went wide when she saw Pansy sitting in the living room, watching Harry's TV and eating a bowl of cereal with marshmallow's in it. She stared, because never in her life would she have thought to see a girl who had grown up much the same way as Draco Malfoy, doing something so... muggle-ish, for lack of a better, more accurate word.

"She's living with me now," said Harry with a grin.

Hermione smiled and waved at Pansy, who waved back. "Good morning. How are the twins?"

asked Pansy.

Hermione sighed and felt the anxiety tighten in her chest. "They're with their father, strong and healthy."

"That's great. Where are you two off to?"

Harry ushered Hermione to the door. "We're going over to see the flat next door. The current tenants are moving out and they agreed to let us see it today. I'll see you later, love."

"Remember we're having lunch with my parents today," Pansy called before the door shut.

The brunette looked at her green-eyed friend in amusement. "You're meeting her parents?"

Harry sighed heavily. "Actually, I've met them already, but her mother wanted me to come over to spend more time with them."

"Is this getting serious?" Hermione asked.

"Maybe," said Harry evasively, but with a mischievous look in his eyes.

"Are you liking that this is getting serious?" she asked.

"Maybe," said Harry with a smile. Hermione wrapped her arms around one of his and gave him a squeeze.

"You finally found your true love," Hermione said with a smile as they stopped in front of a door with a two in a golden Roman numeral. He knocked the door and a teenage girl opened the door. Hermione could swear that she had little hearts in her eyes as she gazed at Harry.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," she said, blushing. "I'll get my dad," she said before running off quickly.

Hermione looked at Harry and snickered. "Mr. Potter? Geez, the girl is absolutely blind!"

Harry glared at her. "Just shush and let's see this place quickly so that we don't bother them too much."

His friend grinned and shook her head. "I don't think their daughter would see this as much of a bother. Mr. Potter," she snickered to herself. Harry just ignored her and they walked in to see the flat.

Draco scowled to himself as he apparated to the building his ex-wife had decided to move into a week ago. No matter what he had said to her, or how he had tried to convince her to stay, she hadn't complied. She had moved out of the Manor and in with her mother, who was helping her with the twins. He had been over at least for an hour every single day to spend time with the children, but he wasn't thrilled about her living so far away.

At least she had finally found an evening to dedicate to him. And no, he was not jealous of his own children. He had wanted to take her out on a romantic dinner to win her over, but she had asked him to let her pick the place they would go. He had been wary to comply, but he knew

Hermione was a sensible girl with classic tastes in everything, including himself, he thought with a smirk.

He knocked on the door of her flat and waited impatiently to be acknowledged. Her mother opened the door and greeted him politely. In her arms she was holding Darius, who was happily sucking on a pacifier. She handed over the baby and then walked off to tell Hermione that he was there for her. Draco smiled at his son and nuzzled the little brown head gently as the baby blinked sleepily, eyes the same shade of gray as his brother and father. "How is my boy?" he murmured as softly as he could.

"You forget that you have two now," said Hermione as she walked over to him with Darien in her arms. The little blond was wide awake and sucking on a thumb. "He has a really bad habit of sucking his thumb. He won't take the pacifier, but I've read that the suction helps sooth some babies, so I guess it's okay for them to enjoy it now."

Draco smiled and kissed the baby in Hermione's arms on the forehead. "Don't worry. After all that I saw that day when they were born, I will never forget that I have two sons. You look lovely by the way," he said, eyeing her from head to toe. She was wearing a simple red dress with a low neckline that flattered her shape, which she had been working very hard to regain. So far, Draco thought, she was definitely succeeding. He had a moment of perverted, dirty thoughts, and wondered if her chest would remain that big. If Hermione would've heard that thought, she would've slapped him. Or maybe not until he wasn't holding their other son.

Hermione smiled and turned to her mother. "They should be going to sleep in about fifteen minutes. Unless one keeps the other up, like they're so fond to do in the middle of the night," she said with an annoyed sigh. "But I love them with all my heart," she said as she kissed the baby in her arms and then set him down in a self-rocking bassinet. She took the brown haired baby from Draco and kissed him as well before placing him next to his brother. "We should go," she said after they stood there for a long moment, gazing at their twins.

Draco nodded and grabbed her coat for her, saying goodbye to her mother and ushering Hermione out the door. "Where are you taking me?" he asked Hermione.

She smiled and gave him a sexy wink that made his heart speed up ridiculously. "You'll see in good time, Mr. Malfoy. We can walk from here, it's not too far," Hermione replied furtively.

Draco didn't know whether to be intrigued or apprehensive. They were after all near the muggle district. Though he had long ago outgrown his petty prejudice, he was still not comfortable around many muggles in one place. But he should've known Hermione would find a way to torture him without actually doing anything to him. They stopped in front of a very brightly lit building, with posters of animals, children caricatures, and some of men and women entwined in a romantic pose. They got into line behind some muggles, and Draco gave her a look.

Hermione smiled. "Surprise! We're going to see a muggle movie. It's like a full length, moving picture with a plot and everything," she said quietly, so that no one overheard her.

"Muggle?" was all Draco muttered back.

She glared at him but didn't have a chance to reply because they were called to the booth where the employee was looking at them in boredom. "Two tickets for 'The Lake House,' please," she said brightly.

"Enjoy the show," said the guy flatly.

Draco gave Hermione another look as she started to drag him towards the door and he put up a fight. "Hermione."

She turned to him in irritation. "Look, this is what constitutes as a muggle date. I haven't seen a movie in ages because first, you were a possessive psycho when we married. Second, I was submersed in my work and didn't have the time. And third, I was pregnant and huge, and too tired to walk over here. Now, I have the time, and I have a date, so I want to see this movie," she said, eyes flashing and daring him to put up a fight.

Draco rolled his eyes before leaning forward to peck her lips and slip some strands of hair behind her ear. "Merlin, you're such a drama queen, Granger," he said before snatching the tickets from her gloved hand and walking towards the man at the door.

Hermione smiled to herself. Honestly, she had been expecting a bigger argument from him, but if he was willing to sit through two hours of a muggle movie, in an enclosed space with muggles, she knew that he was serious about them getting back together.

Draco had never known true horror until he had been forced to sit through what Harry and Ron called "a chick-flick." Of course, he didn't know that phrase yet, and was suffering alone in his head, and trying not to fall asleep as Hermione placed her head against his shoulder. He looked around in apprehension and was slightly relieved to see that he hadn't been the only man who had been conned into coming to see the most ridiculous love story in the world with their partners.

"Do we get dinner after this?" he nearly whined.

She shushed him and slapped his arm. He didn't say anything else for the rest of the movie. When the torture was finally over, he had to endure Hermione's gushes about how great the couple was together, and all they had gone through. He rolled his eyes and tried not to rub his temples in aggravation. Again, why had he been sitting through two hours of hell? Oh yes, because he was trying to get Hermione to marry him again. If it wasn't for that, he would've run out of the building from the opening credits and would've never looked back. But alas, he wanted Hermione to see that he was serious about all of the things he would be doing for her.

"Now we get dinner somewhere nice," said Hermione as they walked out of the building.

"Good," Draco replied, pulling her towards the back of the building and then apparating them straight to Pansy's restaurant. The maître d' nearly tripped over himself to get them one of the best tables. He informed them that Miss Pansy had made it abundantly clear that Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy would always be treated like stars, as well as Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. So the drinks, champagne, wine, or any type of drinks they ordered were on the house for the entire night.

Hermione eyed him over her menu and smirked. "Did you enjoy the movie?" she asked nonchalantly.

Draco eyed her narrowly. "Is there a correct answer to that question?" he asked with a raised

brow.

She smiled to herself. "No, I just want your honest opinion."

Draco weighed his options. If he told her he hated it, she would probably be insulted. If he said he had liked it, she would know at once that he was lying. It was a lose lose situation. He cleared his throat once and took a sip of the wine that the waiter had just brought over. "I didn't care much for the movie because I had you close by. Who can concentrate on some woman on the screen when I have you so up close to me?"

Hermione stared at him for a moment and then smiled, her cheeks a pretty red that Draco hadn't seen in a long time. "You will dance with me tonight?" she asked, looking towards the dance floor near the large, French windows.

Draco took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. "Anything you want, Ms. Granger," he said, gray eyes glittering with a feeling Hermione had resigned herself to never see again.

They ordered their food and talked about the twins, their new habits, and how Hermione hadn't gotten an entire night's worth of sleep for a week now. When she had lived at the mansion, Draco had often let her sleep while he watched over the babies, but now that she was alone, it was up to her and sometimes her mother. She wasn't complaining though. She had never known how deep her love for the two boys would run. Though she had hopes of returning to the trauma center, she didn't want to miss out on her sons growing up; besides, Neville was doing a great job handling all the most important jobs at the center.

Hermione took a sip of her wine and felt her body begin to relax. Though she had been really looking forward to her first date with Draco after the birth of their twins and their divorce, she could feel the exhaustion creeping in. She wanted to sleep, but she was having a good time with Draco. She watched him stand up and then offer a hand to her. She took it and he guided her towards the dance floor, one of his arms slipping around her waist as he held her close and moved gently to the beat.

"You do know that our date will make the front page on tomorrow's paper," she said quietly, her temple brushing against his chin. Draco nodded and kissed her cheekbone.

"Good. That way all the men who want a chance with you will see that you're still with me in a sense," he replied with a small smile. Hermione just laughed quietly and breathed in his familiar scent deeply. How she had missed the feel of his arms around her. "How long do you want me to wait before I can ask you to marry me again?"

Hermione gave a small snort. "I can't just give you a the exact amount of time you have to wait. It will happen when the time is right," she replied.

"The time is right, now, but I don't think you would accept if I asked you," he muttered against her cheek as they moved at a slow, fluid movement.

"It's too soon and this is our first date," Hermione said with a small smile. "I wouldn't accept a marriage proposal on a first date," she said teasingly. "But I think... I will accept when the time is right."

Draco grinned and kissed her cheek as his heart skipped a beat, but before he had a chance to

reply to her words, there was a tap on his shoulder and they both turned to see who it was. His lips curled in a sneer and he tried to pull Hermione away, but she held her ground.

Cormac McLaggen smiled serenely and looked at Hermione. "Would you mind if I cut in?" he asked smoothly.

"Yes," Draco nearly snarled, his hand tightening on Hermione's waist. "Get lost McLaggen, there's no place for you here."

Hermione placed a hand on Draco's chest and gave him a stony look, trying to convey to him without words what she was about to do. What she had to do. "Let me dance with him, Draco. Why don't you go and order us dessert? We really should get back home to the twins," she said gently, her eyes searching his.

Draco glared at her slightly but moved away, his eyes burning with restrained anger. "Get it through your thick skull, McLaggen. She will never accept you in her life," he snapped before walking away.

Hermione turned to Cormac with a serious look on her face and let him lead her towards the center of the dancing couples. "I think we do need to have a talk, Cormac," she said softly.

The tall man looked at her with heat in his eyes and pulled her closer to him. "I thought you had divorced him, sweetheart. After all, why are you giving him another chance when he seems to be enjoying his time with my dear ex-wife?" he asked in a taunting tone.

Hermione bit her bottom lip in annoyance. She knew he was trying to bait her into doubting Draco, but she wouldn't. Not anymore. "I know that he's having dinner with her, but that means nothing. I want to be honest with you, Cormac. Draco and I are going to give us another chance, and I'm not interested in seeing other men. I'm sure you're a good man," she said—though inwardly she wasn't so sure. "But I'm not interested in you. I'm sure you will find a woman who deserves you and who will be the true love of your life. That woman is not me."

"How can you possibly know if you haven't even given me a chance?" he asked, running his fingers over her cheek.

She tried not to flinch at his touch but she did stop moving to the music. "I've made my decision, Cormac, and I hope that you will abide by it," she said before pulling away from him and leaving the dance floor.

McLaggen's eyes narrowed in anger as he watched her take a seat at her table with Malfoy and the other man's eyes met his. An unspoken threat traveled between them and he was satisfied when he saw Malfoy recognize the threat that Cormac posed for him and Hermione. They wouldn't be left alone so easily. Cormac McLaggen didn't know the meaning of defeat.

Darien and Darius had grown into fine looking children. With their mother's face and their father's eyes, they were the most adorable little babies on the playground. Harry Potter and Pansy Parkinson were completely smitten by the two baby boys and had offered to accompany Hermione Granger to the park where she would meet with the children's father.

As she sipped on her iced coffee, her thoughts moved to the man that she was still dating.

Their sons were now five months old, and four months had passed since she had started to date Draco again. She had resumed a sort of part time job at the center, but she had left Neville to handle the main position as boss and director of the entire center. She still took care of most of the paperwork and was still doing research whenever she could, which wasn't too often when she had two boys who were trying to learn how to sit up already.

Many things kept her busy and forced her to keep her mind off of the fact that since she and Draco had run into Cormac McLaggen, he had been sending her an arrangement of flowers each first of the month. She got rid of the flowers, and had even asked the florists to send them back to him; but short of putting up some type of restraining order, there wasn't much she could do. She didn't want to resort to something that would bring more attention to her and Draco, even though the papers usually printed some story of them every week and always managed to get their pictures even when they thought they were safe.

She was silently fuming as she watched her best friend and his fiancée play with the twins on the swings of the playground. All those months ago, McLaggen had struck a nerve when he had mentioned Draco seeing Daphne for dinner. On today's paper, there was a horribly infuriating article written by who else? Rita Skeeter. She had new pictures of her last date with Draco, and had managed to get a few shots of Draco and Daphne at lunch just the day before. The article was full of hippogriff dung and questioned whether Daphne had a better chance with Draco than his ex-wife did.

Though Hermione had promised herself that she wouldn't let this get to her, well... it was getting to her. She sat there and waited for Draco to arrive, tapping the foot of her crossed leg against the empty stroller by her side. Maybe she should've accepted Cormac out of spite, she thought petulantly. But no, that wouldn't be fair to him or to anybody really and besides, Draco had told her in all honesty that he saw Daphne the way she saw Potter. Too bad the same thing couldn't be said about her. Hermione had seen the googly-eyes she had been making at him in the pictures. No, she wasn't jealous. Jealousy wasn't in her vocabulary, she thought with a scowl.

"Hello there, my Gryffindor," said Draco as he came up behind her and pressed a kiss to her cheek.

Hermione refrained from wiping her cheek and asking him if he had kissed Daphne with those lips. She said nothing as he walked off to hold each twin briefly before coming back over to sit next to her. Draco eyed her for a moment and noticed the stiffness in her shoulders. "Is everything all right?" he asked her.

Hermione looked at him coolly. "Did you have fun with Daphne yesterday? Why is it that Rita Skeeter always has pictures of your 'dates' with her? Are you doing this on purpose, for my benefit?" she asked darkly.

"You didn't have much sleep last night, did you?" asked Draco calmly.

"I haven't gotten a normal night's rest in months, Draco. You already know that," she snapped.

Draco rolled his eyes. "That was your decision. If you hadn't been so hardheaded, you could've stayed at the Manor and accepted my help," he said dryly. "What is this about? Are you really that jealous of me going out with a friend?"

This time, Hermione glared at him head on. "Of course not," she bit out.

"Because if that's the case, all you have to do is ask me not to go out with her again and I will stop," he said calmly.

"You can do what you want," she said irritably. "I have no right to ask that of you."

Draco scooted closer and slid an arm around her slim shoulders, his mouth close to her jaw. "You are the mother of my children and the woman I want to marry again. Your wish is my command," he said before kissing the spot under her ear.

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed at the feel of his lips on her skin. How was it that with such a simple touch from him, her heart nearly stopped beating in her chest? She pulled away and turned to look at him fully as the gentle breeze ruffled his hair and pushed hers into her eyes. She forced her hair back and gave him a strange look. "You would really stop seeing her for me?"

Draco nodded watched her eyes soften before she shook her head and refused to say another word. "I'll stop taking her to dinner. You don't even have to ask. I just hadn't realized how much it bothered you, and I'm sorry if I caused you grief."

Hermione pushed his silky hair away from his eyes as well and smiled. "You know, if you had shown me this side of you when we were in school, we could've been married a long time ago and our kids would be toddlers by now. We could've avoided all of the pain and grief, and harsh words."

"And the physical assault on your part," said Draco with a snort. She grinned and nodded at the memories.

"But I guess all this has made us stronger people. Ron is happy with his wife and son, and I'm happy with you," she admitted.

Draco smirked and leaned forward to steal a kiss from her. There was something terribly satisfying about hearing Hermione say that she was happy with him. He had waited long enough to ask her to marry him again, and the time felt right. He just had to find the moment to do it while Potter and Pans weren't around.

"Ugh, get a room," Potter called from where he was swinging Darius gently in a baby swing.

Pansy slapped him on the back of the head before going back to bouncing Darien in her arms and the baby giggled in glee. She began to walk towards them with a sly grin on her face. "You know, if you two need some time alone, Potter and I can baby-sit for a few hours," she said.

Hermione laughed and shook her head. "No, thank you. I'm saving myself for marriage," she said, voice filled with sarcasm. Draco smirked and offered no comment.

Harry walked over with the other baby in his arms and grinned. "Why don't we go get something to eat? I'm starving," he said as he gently placed the boy in the stroller.

Hermione looked at Draco and he nodded. "Okay, just give me a few minutes to go back home and get the boy's their bottles. I wasn't planning on going anywhere else so I would go home in time to feed them," she said as she stood and threw her cup into the trash bin.

"I'll go with you," said Draco.

She shook her head. "No, you'll get in the way and I won't talk long," she said with a smile, not trying to insult him in any way. "Just stay and watch over your children."

"Fine," he muttered as she pressed a kiss to his cheek and then to the twins before grabbing the keys from her purse and walking the short distance to the building where her flat was located.

Hermione grinned to herself and felt her heart warm at the thought of Draco giving up one of his "friends" for her. Though he may have seen Daphne as a friend, it was so very obvious that she didn't see him the same way. The further Greengrass was from Draco, the better for Hermione. She had never been so insecure regarding the men in her life, but she and Draco had gone through so much, she had a right to feel the way she did.

As she prepared the two bottles of formula for her twins—even though she fully supported breastfeeding, but wasn't willing to do it in public when everyone was watching—she heard a knock at the door and rolled her eyes. Why couldn't Draco just listen to her for once? It couldn't be her mother, she was away for the weekend, visiting one of Hermione's aunts from her father's side and would return tomorrow morning.

She walked over to open the door with a sigh that stopped when she saw who was at the door. "Hello," she greeted. "What are you doing here?"

"May I come in? There's something of dire importance that we need to discuss."

Hermione hesitated but finally nodded and stepped aside to let her visitor in. She just hoped that the visit was quick so that she could get back to her sons and Draco. Her visitor wasn't dangerous. At least, that was what she thought.

Draco looked at his watch in annoyance and was getting tired of watching Potter and Pansy looking at each other with that lovey-dovey look. "How long can it take to make a bloody bottle?" he asked no one in particular.

Potter shrugged. "I know it doesn't take this long. I'll go see what's taking so long," he said before kissing Pansy's cheek.

"No, I'll go," said Draco as he stood from the bench and eyed his sons. "They better be safe when we get back," he threatened as Pansy rolled her eyes and gave him a dismissive look. He just smirked and walked quickly towards Hermione's flat. He had a strange feeling in his gut that he couldn't quite place. Hopefully it would die when he set eyes on Hermione again.

As he neared her door, he noticed with a frown that she had left it open. He stepped inside and looked around for any sign of trouble. He felt slightly foolish, but he couldn't hear any type of noise anywhere in the flat. "Hermione?" he called, but received no reply. "Stop playing, Granger," he said as he walked into the kitchen and spotted the half-made bottles of formula.

The feeling in his gut expanded to his chest and he walked to her bedroom to check if she was there. She wasn't there either, and as he turned to go, something taped to the mirror of her vanity. He moved towards the sheet of paper and pulled it off easily, his heart thundering in his

chest. He sat down and read the note, realizing with a painful jolt that it was her neat handwriting. He couldn't believe what the note said. He didn't want to believe that Hermione would be capable of doing such a thing to him. To their sons.

Potter found him sitting there like a statue, no feeling in his eyes as he stared at nothing. "Where's Hermione?" he asked.

Draco handed over the note without a word and stood, walking out of the room. Harry frowned and wondered about Malfoy's strange behavior, but then he read the note the other man had handed over and felt the blood drain from his face. No, he couldn't be reading and seeing correctly. Hermione would never do what the note said. Never. This was some type of sick joke. He checked her drawers and her closet.

Everything was gone. He read the note again and felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach.

'Draco, I'm sorry for doing this, but I can only hope that the children remain safe under your care. I'm tired. I can't care for them both on my own anymore. You and I will never be. Please don't look for me because you won't find me. I will never come back again. I will start over far from here, so please take care of the boys. I'm so sorry.

Hermione G.'

Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry (Hides behind bullet-proof glass), ha, you can't get me here! Okay, now that I'm safe, I was kinda stuck as to how to get to this place in the fic, but finally I found my way. You're all probably sharpening the pitchforks and locating bullets that can go through that glass right about now, but I did warn you guys that I loved drama and had a knack for it. Do you guys think Hermione is capable of what happened here in the end? What about her mystery visitor? Hmm? Hmm? I can't tell, but all will be answered in the next chapter, and hopefully it won't take more than a month to update.

Thank you very mucho for the reviews for the last chapter, and for the poking and prodding of me to stop working on other fics and getting to this one. I want to finish it, so that I can dedicate my time to other works, and also because I want to take a break from HP writing. Don't worry, I will come back, but I really need it. Thanks again for taking the time to read and review, and I hope everyone has a great week!

Please don't hate me and ignore the typos and grammar errors!

Joey

Chapter 18: Rotten to The Core

Warning: Language and some violence, but nothing too bad.

I gave and gave the best of me

But couldn't give you what you need

"Go away, Potter," Draco said acidly from his desk at the Manor.

Harry reigned in the impulse to smash in Malfoy's nose. It couldn't be that the man who had almost pleaded to his friend to let them be together again was going to believe that she had willingly left him and their two sons. Two children Harry had seen her take great care of and who had received all the love that their mother had to offer. This made him angry and the window behind Malfoy cracked into many lines.

Draco looked at the window briefly and then went back to his work, or as much as he could with Potter hovering there like some type of troll. He sighed and sat back, looking at the other man in vehemence.

"How can you possibly believe that she is capable of abandoning her two sons?" Harry asked darkly.

"She said she was tired. Maybe that's why she left. I just... I can't understand why she just didn't talk to me about what she was feeling. I could've taken the twins with me in order to give her a break. She just didn't have to up and leave completely," said Draco, averting his eyes from the fiery green glaring at him.

Harry scowled. "She didn't do this, and if you ever loved her even a fraction of what you said you did, or still do, you will look for her and prove that she up and left of her own free will. You and I both know Hermione and we know that she would never abandon the two children she took so much care in when they were growing in her womb."

Draco let out a deep breath. "What if..." he gritted his teeth and began again. "What if we find her... and she did leave of her own free will?"

The dark haired man shook his head. "She wouldn't. Our Hermione wouldn't do that. She never would've left Ron in the first place, had you not blackmailed her into it. Remember that. Remember how long it took you to get her to trust you and to let go of her resentment in order to be with you."

Draco stared at him and swallowed hard. Potter had very valid points, though he wasn't about to admit that to the other man. She had been gone for only a few days now, but it still hurt to think of the letter he had found. He hadn't wanted to believe it, and still his brain refused to let him believe it. But also, his heart was afraid of what he had just told Potter. What if they found her and she had actually left willingly? What would he do then? He grunted and sat up in his chair. "What do you propose we do, Potter?" he asked.

Harry let out a deep breath. "Verify that the letter is legit. Do you still have it with you? Also, we can hire a private investigator to search any mode of her leaving the country. We can also have him ask around to see if anyone has seen her. Until I hear it from her lips, I will not believe that she left of her own accord," he said with conviction.

Draco nodded and grabbed a quill and parchment to write a letter for an investigator he knew to be the best. "For all our sakes, Potter, let's hope that she really didn't just leave because she wanted to get away from me and her children. I want to trust her, but the doubt is there," he

admitted.

Harry didn't know what to reply to that. Hermione and Malfoy's relationship had had so many ups and downs; he understood what the other man was getting at. But he had been Hermione's best friend since they had been twelve. More than half of their lives. He trusted Hermione and knew she wouldn't have left behind her sons or the man that she loved. They would find her and get some answers.

Hermione woke with a start, her heart racing in her chest, and her head pounding in pain. She looked around the darkened room and felt her breathing speed up when she didn't recognize anything around her. The curtains were drawn shut and she stood slowly to open them, squinting at the bright sunlight that flooded the room. She swallowed hard when she recognized nothing on the outside either. All her eyes could see was an expanse of tall trees and no other houses nearby.

What the hell had happened? Where was she? She felt her head, high above her ear and grimaced when her fingers touched a scabbing wound. She thought back as much as she could, trying to remember how she had gotten there. Then it all came back to her suddenly, and she nearly swayed as she remembered what had happened that afternoon when she had opened the door only to encounter.....

"Hello," she greeted. "What are you doing here?"

"May I come in? There's something of dire importance that we need to discuss."

Hermione hesitated but finally nodded and stepped aside to let her visitor in. She just hoped that the visit was quick so that she could get back to her sons and Draco. Her visitor wasn't dangerous. At least, that was what she thought. "What can I help you with Lavender?"

"I just wanted to come visit you, to see how you were doing with your kids and Malfoy," she said with an easy smile.

Hermione smiled back and motioned her to follow her to the kitchen. "We're okay; I'm just getting some bottles of formula for them. Harry and Pansy are waiting with Draco and the kids at the park. We're going to lunch. Why don't you and Ron join us?"

"I don't think we can. Ron's a little busy right now," replied Lavender.

"Right," Hermione said with a small smile. "Probably with Roan. How is he, by the way?"

Lavender frowned. "Who?"

Hermione frowned and started to shake one of the bottles. "Roan," she said, faltering slightly when the other woman shrugged and looked puzzled over the name. Something occurred to her, and she subconsciously reached for her wand, realizing too late that she had foolishly left it in her purse.

"Let me see your hands," said the woman standing behind her, poking her with the tip of her wand against her temple.

Hermione let out a slow breath and lifted her hands, turning to look at her. "Who are you?" she hissed. "I know you're not Lavender because Roan happens to be her son, who you knew nothing about. You're either an idiot or a hermit because the birth of that boy was all over the papers."

"Very smart, Hermione. I guess you're not as stupid as I thought," said the Lavender impostor. "Now walk ahead of me and don't you dare try anything stupid. You may have been a very accomplished witch back in school, but so was I. I was one of the best in my House."

Hermione walked slowly, her hands held up where the impostor could see them. She was trying to think quickly, but if this person was as good as they boasted, Hermione was risking getting hexed or disarmed in an unpleasant way. She let out a deep breath and ducked, sending her arm into the impostor's, causing her to drop her wand. Then it was an all out cat fight, confirming to Hermione that though they were in a Lavender façade, the person behind it was a female too.

Being the accomplished fighter that she was—and she had to be, to take down a man like Draco—Hermione nearly beat the stuffing out of the other woman, who also got in some good jabs into her ribs and jaw. The Lavender fake used her to feet to slam them into Hermione and throw her back onto the floor, scrambling to her feet quickly as Hermione stood again and wiped the blood from her nose. Before Hermione could do anything else but draw breath, she was on the floor again, but this time with a wound on her head, and with her vision unfocused, the remains of a broken vase all around her.

"Did you really think that you could best me, Hermione? Did you? Merlin the great, I never knew what Draco saw in you or Pansy. He really does not know the difference between beauty and common looks. Cormac was a fool as well, but he doesn't matter to me that way anymore. As soon as you're gone, he'll have me to take care of him," she said with a smirk. Lavender's face moved into Hermione's line of vision.

"What? Cat got your tongue, little Hermione?"

Hermione tried to reply, but the vase breaking on her head had left her dazed and dizzy. She lay there, unable to do a thing as the Lavender fake immobilized her and then proceeded to clean up the glass and any traces of their fight with more charms. Then she disappeared into her bedroom and Hermione lost sight of her for a few minutes. While she was gone, she tried desperately to free herself from the spell, but she couldn't. With no wand, and wounded, there wasn't much she could do but gasp in effort.

Lavender came back and kneeled next to Hermione, producing a short letter from her pocket. "Can you guess what this is?" she asked with a sweet smile. "I'll read it to you, since you seem to be a bit... dazed at the moment." She read it and smiled at the cry of rage that Hermione released. "When they come looking for you, they'll find your clothes and you gone. Poor Draco will be so angry and devastated, I'll be the perfect shoulder for him to mourn on. Don't worry, there's someone willing to take care of you while I take care of Draco. I can't wait for your brats to grow up and leave for Hogwarts. I won't hurt them, don't worry. But if they become a nuisance, I'll make them disappear, maybe even send them with you. But enough talking, I don't want anyone to catch me here, and if anyone did see me, they'll think that the last person you spoke to was Lavender Brown. Say goodnight, Hermione," she said with a sinister smile.

Before Hermione could utter a word, her vision blurred as the woman cast a sleep spell over her, and she could've sworn that the brunette had turned into a blonde.

Hermione cursed Daphne high and low in her head. If she was participating in this, then McLaggen wouldn't be far behind. She remembered the fake saying that there would be someone to take care of her. He was the only person who came to mind. She checked the windows and the door, knowing that she was hoping for too much, if her captors had been foolish enough to let her wander out. As she looked at her face in the mirror, she grimaced when she saw the greenish bruises and a few cuts that had been cleaned.

There was nothing in the room that would help her break out or pick the lock on the door. All there was, was a simple twin sized bed, a small dresser, a table, and one chair. The bathroom was just as bare, except for little bottles of shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and some towels. Just as she was exiting the bathroom, the doorknob on the main door turned and the lock clicked. Her breath came out in an angry 'whoosh' and she tried with all her might to remain calm.

McLaggen and the ex-McLaggen entered the room, smug smiles on their faces as they shut the door. "Good morning, my love. Did you sleep well these past three days?" asked Cormac. "I was about to murder my dear ex-wife because I thought she had thrown you into a coma because of the head injury, but we had someone check you out and they said you were fine, but you needed rest. The exhaustion, paired with the concussion put you to sleep easily."

"Don't thank me for taking you away from the hell that it must be to take care of two little brats," said Daphne with a look of disgust on her face. "But don't worry. I really have nothing against them. Once I marry Draco and move into the Manor, I'll just have the house elves take care of them and keep them as far away from Draco and me as possible."

Hermione's hands were itching to rip the blonde hair right out of the woman's scalp. "Take me back McLaggen. Even if Draco believes that I would abandon him out of the nothing, Harry and Ron will not, and they will look for me. When they find me, I will use every influence I have to crush you if you don't take me back this instance," she said softly.

Cormac chuckled and shook his head once. "They can look, but it doesn't mean that they will find you. They won't even be able to trace your magic because you won't be able to use any here. The land we are on has been charmed to only allow my magic. So even if you get a hold of my wand by some circumstance, it won't work. Wandless magic won't work either. I know how you and Potter react to stressful situations, breaking glass and affecting the weather. Consider your magic void and null while you are in this house and on this land. You're powerless," he said, relishing in the feel of power and superiority he had over her.

"What do you want with me?" Hermione snarled as she moved forward. "Why couldn't you just accept the fact that I had no interest in you? You as a man have no appeal to me whatsoever. You didn't in school, and you don't now. Why can't you just leave me alone?" she ended almost in a scream.

Daphne rolled her eyes at the dramatics. Really, what had Draco seen in her? "Tell her what she's won by denying you Cormac," she said with glee.

Cormac nodded and smiled at his ex-wife. Her evilness competed with his own, and that had been one of her main appeals as a partner to him, but he had always had an itch that Daphne couldn't scratch. He'd always wanted Hermione Granger as his own and had had to watch her be with Ron Weasley and then Draco Malfoy. Apparently Malfoy had been much more important

to her than the other man because she had bore him two sons. But they didn't matter anymore. He was going to have his way with her and Malfoy, Potter, and Weasley weren't here to get in the way.

He was aware that he was smirking evilly while staring into space, but then she was in front of him and her fist had connected with his jaw. She was tiny, but her hook was mean and she nearly threw him to the floor. Then she sidestepped him and went for Daphne, grabbing a handful of blonde hair and pulling with all her might. Daphne screamed in pain and they broke into an all out brawl, occasionally Hermione took some hits at Cormac.

He didn't want to hurt her, but she was a wild thing and she knew very well how to fight. After slamming Daphne into the full length mirror by the dresser, she came after him, using the momentum to slam a knee into his gut and breaking his nose with her fist. His anger got the better of him and he grabbed her around the throat and slammed her into the wall, pinning her with his body as she thrashed in his grip.

"I will kill you, sweetheart," he murmured against her ear, cutting off her air supply as his hand tightened around her throat. "Make mistake, I have no qualms about killing you if you don't cooperate with me." He smiled. "Now, you have three options. One, you willingly submit to me, which I know you won't do. Two, I obliviate you, and make you start from scratch. Or three, I have you take a love potion, which will make you more than willing. If I obliviate you, you will forget Malfoy, and your children, but I suppose you won't want that. If you take the love potion, you will do all I want you to do, and you will love every second of it. Personally, I suppose you will prefer option one. You can warm up to me slowly, in your own time, and you will remember your children."

"Fuck... you," she hissed, not caring that she usually wasn't one to resort to such vulgar language.

"That's what we're negotiating right now, sweetheart," he murmured, his hand still around her throat in a tight grasp. "I have no problem doing this in front of my ex-wife right now," he said with a feral grin, his free hand smoothing over her waist and hip.

"Don't touch me!" Hermione screamed, letting go of the hand around her throat and digging her nails into his face.

Cormac let her go with a yell of pain and before Hermione could draw in a deep breath, his hand was in her hair and he was dragging her out of the room. She regained her footing but with much tripping over her own feet, and she saw that he had locked her in a servant's bedroom. They passed through the kitchen and stopped in front of a bare wall. He knocked it five times with his wand and it opened much the same way the wall at Diagon Alley parted. She grunted in pain as he pulled her down a long stairwell made of stone.

"Where are you taking me?" she hissed, digging her nails into the hand that was pulling her hair. She could feel blood seeping out of the wound that had only begun to heal on her head.

McLaggen let go of her hair and grabbed her forearm instead, dragging her down a corridor that lead into many cells with black bars and surrounded by stone walls. He threw her inside one and locked it. "This is your punishment for harming me and Daphne. I'm going to leave he here for a week maybe, so that you can have time to think about what you want to do. I won't let you starve, but you won't get the luxurious that you are so used to, my love."

"Go piss yourself," Hermione spat, turning her back to him. "I will rather die of starvation down here than willingly be with you. Asshole. I will never accept you, and when Harry and Ron find me, I will make sure that you rot in the darkest cell of Azkaban."

Cormac chuckled softly. "We'll see. We'll see," he said before leaving her alone in the damp cell, with only a small window high above her head. All she had available to her was a toilet covered by a short wall, barely giving any privacy.

Once Hermione heard the distant clatter of the wall closing, she let the tears loose and couldn't choke back her cries as much as she tried. Bastard, he was right. Her magic felt like it was gone. She had always felt it there, like light static in the background that she had grown used to feeling. Now it was gone and she felt bereft. Her thoughts turned to her twins. Oh, her babies would miss her terribly while she was gone, and she was missing them now as well. Draco..... something inside her broke at the thought that Draco wouldn't trust her enough to not believe the note. If he did believe it, she would never forgive him.

Unfortunately, her only hope was with Harry and Ron at the moment. They knew her better than anyone, and they would realize that she hadn't willingly abandoned her sons and the man she loved. Merlin, she hadn't even said it back to him. She had never told him that she reciprocated the feeling. More tears trailed down her cheeks as she paced the cell and tried to think of some way to get out of her predicament.

A thick blanket appeared in front of her along with something that looked like a cot for her to sleep on, as well as a clear bag with gauze and alcohol for her to cure her own wounds. She paid the things no heed and kept pacing. What could she do aside from cooperating with McLaggen in order to get out of the cell?

'Please, Draco. Don't give up on me,' she thought desperately.

Draco watched his sons as they all sat out in the sun, on a large blanket. They had finally learned to sit up, though their pediatric healer had said that their milestones could be a little late because they had been born smaller than most children. Moving them into the Manor again had been a great change for both boys; they missed their mother and had expressed it with two sets of very healthy lungs and in the middle of the night.

Hermione had been gone for nearly two weeks now, but Potter was always there reminding him that she hadn't gone willingly. Draco had kept his hope up, even though each day that passed without knowing anything about her made something die inside of him. His sons helped to keep that hope high. Though they had the color of his eyes, the shape was all Hermione's. Same for the nose, mouth, and cheekbones.

He smiled slightly when Darius, his little brown-haired twin, handed over a saliva dripping toy. He picked up the boy and set him on his left arm before taking Darien, who was happily sucking on a pacifier, in his other arm. He had never thought that fatherhood would be such a hard job, he thought as he rocked them both in his arms. Darius looked up at him and Draco smiled again as a little hand reached for his nose.

Even if Hermione had left, these two little brats were counting on him to be a good father for them. It was up to him to forge them into good, honorable men as they grew. He would always

be there for them, even when their mother wouldn't. He looked down and noticed that Darien was now asleep, a chubby little hand wrapped tightly around his shirt. Darius' eyes were slowly drooping shut, and with a deep breath he finally drifted to sleep.

He was contemplating his predicament on how to stand up without waking either one of the boys, when Potter walked out through the back door, looking only slightly disheveled. "Need a hand?" he asked, noticing that both twins were asleep and that there was no possible way of Malfoy standing without either squeezing one boy too hard, or dropping either one.

"If you will," said Draco in annoyance.

Harry grabbed Darius gently and rocked the boy when his eyes opened slightly. He settled back into sleep quickly and snuggled into the familiar arms. Draco stood with very little jostling of Darien and they moved into the Manor to set both boys down for their afternoon nap. Afterwards, they walked into Draco's office to talk in peace.

"Have you found anything?" asked Draco.

Harry shook his head. "Which is unusual because we haven't been able to trace her magic either. Each person has a different magic signature that is recorded by the Ministry. Hermione's hasn't been used since the day she disappeared. I'm telling you that there's something going on because even if she had left, wouldn't she still use her magic?" he asked.

Draco nodded once. "The investigator hasn't found anyone who has seen her either. He has been asking all her friends and acquaintances, so we can expect that soon this will be leaked to the media and everyone who was close to her will be hit by the explosion. Rita Skeeter will have a ball with all this," he muttered angrily.

"We can't let her influence all this, Malfoy. You have to keep thinking that Hermione wouldn't be capable of doing this. She isn't that type of person, though you may be blinded by this because of the circumstances, I know that deep down you know that she wouldn't do something like this to you, to all of us," Harry said, running a hand through his hair. "Besides, she worked damn hard on the trauma center, and she wouldn't have left her research and all off her precious work behind like this. "Have you given any thought to reporting this to the ministry as a kidnapping?"

"We have no proof that she was taken against her will. If we tell them of the note, they will say that it wasn't a kidnapping," Draco replied. "Is your source still examining the letter?"

Harry nodded. "He has suspicions that it's a forgery. Just a few more days and we'll know for sure. If it's a forgery, we'll go to the ministry so that they can look into this. Also, once this reaches the media, you'll have to make a statement. We may be able to use this to our advantage by asking for the public's support. If anyone has seen her, they will speak up and we can have drink veritaserum in order to make sure that what they tell us is the truth."

"You've given this a lot of thought, Potter," said Draco quietly.

"Something you should be doing as well," Harry replied. "Since you were the one who said that you loved her."

Draco sighed and nodded. "We'll keep using all of our resources to find her. I'm beginning to believe all that you have been saying. Hermione wouldn't give up all that she loves so easily.

Not even magic. What else can we do?"

"Did you take her keys from her flat?" Harry asked.

The blond nodded and opened a drawer on his desk, taking the keys and tossing them to the other man. "What are you going to do with them?"

Harry shrugged. "I'll take another look around the flat to see if there's anything out of the ordinary. If Hermione was taken against her will, she would've put up a fight. She would've waged war against whoever attacked her. There has to be something," he murmured.

Draco nodded. "If the investigator learns anything new, I will contact you as soon as I can," he said, standing and walking Potter towards the foyer, where he would be able to apparate out of the Manor.

"Hang in there, Malfoy," Potter said seriously. "For the sake of the twins, if not your own, don't believe that Hermione left. Keep thinking that she was kidnapped. Nothing more," he said before he was gone.

Draco stood there for a moment and let out a deep breath. Potter was right. He couldn't give up hope, even though it was a very fragile hope he was holding onto.

Harry looked around Hermione's flat for the fifth time in the last two weeks that she had been gone. Everything was clean and in its place. Whoever had taken Hermione had been planning this for a while and they had been smart. He walked into the sitting room and spotted the stroller the boys had been using the day she had disappeared. There was also a diaper bag and some stuffed animals sitting inside.

He moved into the sitting room and noticed the magical photos moving around, many of him with Ron, of them together, and many more of the twins. If she had taken the time to find the beautiful frames for the amazing photos of her sons, she wouldn't have left on her own.

As he leaned down to look at one picture of Hermione holding Roan, while Harry held Darius and Ron held Darien, his wand fell out of his pocket, clattering and rolling under one of the sofas that Hermione had been dead set on buying before she had moved into the flat.

He dropped to his knees and reached blindly for the smooth piece of wood. "Son of a bit—..." he stopped his curse only to look at the blood oozing from the cut on his finger. What had he cut himself on? It had felt like glass.

He stood and walked to the kitchen to find something to clean the blood with, but he was hesitant to dirty any of her kitchen towels. He walked towards the stroller and looked around for any type of napkins. He found some and winced as he pressed them onto his finger. Then something caught his eye and he felt his suspicions confirm. Sitting inside the diaper bag was Hermione's wand. She would've never left it behind if she had been planning on deserting her sons and her ex-husband. Another clue that would work on reporting this as a kidnapping to the ministry.

Harry set the wand on the coffee table and moved to lift the couch slightly to grab his wand and find what had cut him. He found pieces of glass under the couch and frowned as he picked up

the one with his blood on it. The glass looked familiar and with a start he realized that it was the vase that Pansy had given to Hermione as a house warming gift. Hermione had loved it, and Harry remembered seeing it in its spot by the pictures on the end table the day they had last seen Hermione.

He looked under the other couch and found more pieces, but he saw something else that made his blood freeze. On those pieces of the vase, he saw that there was dried blood that he hoped did not belong to Hermione. Well, now they had their proof that she hadn't gone anywhere with anyone willingly.

Hermione scrubbed at the dirt and grime on her skin and forced herself to not shudder. After spending more than a week—almost two, which meant that she had been gone about three weeks already—in the cell, eating nothing but broth and bread, and drinking water, she realized that she would've rather stayed there instead of cavorting with McLaggen. But alas, she couldn't. She had realized that it would be easier escaping the room in the house, than the cell in the dungeons of the house they were in.

His stipulations to let her out had been that she would wear the clothes that he chose for her, which were sitting in the dresser, and that she would have dinner with him every time he chose to see her. She had reluctantly agreed, since there was no other way of getting out of the cell without magic or anything to pick the lock either. Now she was back in the bedroom she had started in, showering and rinsing the dried blood from her face and hair. She had been in there for about an hour now and still there were some dirty spots that were giving her problems.

When she was done, she reluctantly slipped into a silky, red dress that hugged her hips and flattered her figure. Her hair was still damp but in her usual, wild curls. She ignored the make-up he had bought for her, as well as the jewelry and waited impatiently for McLaggen to arrive. She would have to refrain from pounding his face in, lest she risk being locked in the cold, dreary cell again.

She looked up from examining the ever present bruises, including the ones that hadn't faded completely from her neck, and watched as McLaggen stepped into the room, a smug look on his face. "You aren't ready yet?" he asked.

"I am," she replied darkly. "I just don't feel like wearing any make-up or jewelry. Take it or go fuck yourself," she spat as she slipped into the matching shoes.

Cormac merely shrugged. "Fine, do I don't suppose you'll want to wear this either," he taunted, bringing out the medallion that Draco had given her a while back.

Hermione tried not to react, because he couldn't possibly know of the emotional significance that the piece of jewelry had. She sighed in fake irritation and nodded. "That I will wear," she said, extending her hand and trying not to recoil when his fingers brushed hers.

"Now, don't try any funny business. I won't hesitate in taking you down either magically or physically," he said, motioning to the door.

They walked side by side towards the dining room, Hermione looking rather stiff, and with McLaggen carrying his wand in his hand just in case. The sun was already going down in wherever it was that they were, and the table was set, food hot and wine served. In his bid to be

a gentleman, McLaggen helped her into her chair, while Hermione sneered and refused to even speak to him anymore.

"Eat," he said as he sat down and picked up his fork.

Hermione did, but only barely, trying very hard to not spit the food out in his face. She still wasn't ready to try an escape. She needed a foolproof plan, which incredulously enough, she had not been able to come up with yet. She stared at the food in the fine china and almost jumped when he spoke again.

"Eat more and drink your wine," he said, sounding very serious.

She glared at him and took an unlady like gulp from her wine, watching as he grinned in amusement. She sat back and just stared into space, not caring that she really was hungry; she wouldn't give him the pleasure of seeing that though. She took another sip of her wine, fully intending on acting out, when a slow feeling crept over her. She knew the symptoms but couldn't do a thing about it as her eyes shifted to Cormac, a smile curling her face as feelings of love and desire went through her.

"Had a change of heart, my sweet?" he asked with a knowing smile.

"Do you know how much I love you, Cormac?" she asked happily, her hand reaching over to touch his.

McLaggen stood. "As much as I would love to take advantage of you in this state, Daphne is pretty incompetent when it comes to potions. She was only able to make the easiest love potion and it will only last two hours. Now, normally it's enough for a person to take advantage of someone else, but the ministry frowns upon it. They call it date rape or something of the sort," he said, taking her hand and kissing her knuckles.

He walked her outside and showed her the setting sun as he spotted his ex-wife lounging by the tree with a camera in her hand. He wrapped his arms around Hermione's waist and nearly lost it when she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. Daphne came closer and took as many pictures as she was able to while Hermione remained oblivious, fawning over him and telling him how much she loved him.

"Go along, Hermione. Be a good girl and go back to your room," he said gently, knowing full well that once the door closed, it would automatically lock. "And don't forget to close the door, lest you get a cold draft."

"Will you be joining me, Cormac?" Hermione asked with a seductive smile, her heart pounding when he returned it.

"Not tonight my love. I have a lot of work to do," he said. Hermione pouted but walked away, a smile still curling at her lips.

"That was sick on so many levels," Daphne said with a laugh.

"Develop the pictures as soon as you can and you know what to do after," said Cormac. "I never knew you were so conniving," he said with a grin. "Taking those pictures was the best thing you have ever thought of. If Potter and Malfoy needed convincing that Hermione left willingly, well,

here it is. In a few days time, the whole world will know that Hermione Granger is mine."

Daphne sniffed in contempt. "Cormac, I'm feeling neglected with all this talk of Granger. Take care of me before I go?" she asked in a breathy voice, batting her eyelashes and raising his desire the way only she had been able to ever do.

"Fine, but tomorrow morning, you get these pictures developed and delivered to Rita Skeeter," he said, taking her hand and walking her back into the Manor that had been in his mother's family, but no one really knew of. It wasn't even registered to him, now that he was the only McLaggen alive. It had been the perfect place to keep his little pet and have his way with her. Merlin, he loved being evil.

Tomorrow, Malfoy wouldn't know what hit him.

Oh damn, what the hell is going to happen now? Poor Draco and Hermione. Still, I'm liking the way things are going and we are approaching a brand new ending. If I'm not mistaken, someone asked how long this fic would be, and now that I've edited, I can say that it will be twenty-two chapters instead of twenty as I had thought. At least that's how I've planned it, unless I change more things around and make it slightly shorter. Dunno for sure, but that's my estimate as of now.

Thanks for the death threats and the urging for me to update soon, but please have patience. I'm working as fast as I can and there are days when I don't want to write and all I want to do is read. Today was not that day, since I typed this chapter up today. So we now see that Hermione didn't really leave, but was in reality kidnapped. I will give you a tidbit from next chapter and I'll say that Harry and Draco will battle it up over what's to come. So stay tuned my peeps. Thanks for the great reviews and suggestions, and sorry for the grammatical errors and typos. Everyone have a great weekend!

Byebye

Joey

Chapter 19: Caught

Warnings: Violence and just allusions to rape. Please don't read if it bothers you.

You walked away, you stole my life

Just to find what you're looking for

"This is a load of rubbish," Ron spat as he looked at the various images on the front of the Daily Prophet.

"But Malfoy isn't going to think that. I will bet you my favorite and newest broom that he will

believe these pictures. His faith in Hermione was weak to begin with. After he's seen these pictures, he will believe that she left him and their sons to go away with this piece of sh—"

"Why didn't you tell him about your bloody proof from the moment you found it, Harry?" asked Ron in exasperation. "It's obvious that there was some type of struggle at Mione's flat, but now the doubts will be in his stupid blond head and he won't help us find her!"

Harry just let out a heavy breath. "I think we should wait a bit more. The group of Aurors that I asked to take care of this will give us some answers tomorrow. Then we will know if we need to begin an allegation of kidnapping. If that blood is Hermione's I will use the influence that I have over the ministry. Right now, I think you and I need to pay McLaggen a visit. If these pictures are 'real,' he knows where Hermione is."

Ron nodded and they both floo'd directly to the offices of McLaggen. The secretary looked up at them with wide eyes. She cleared her throat twice before she was able to produce any words. "H-h-how can I help you?" she asked nervously.

"We need to see McLaggen. Tell him that we're coming in and we won't take no for an answer," said Harry seriously.

"I-I'm sorry Mr. Potter, but Mr. McLaggen has been on vacation for a month now and he said that he did not wish to be disturbed. He left us no address and we don't know when he will return," said the woman quickly.

Ron let out a string of curses that had Harry and the secretary wincing. "Do we need any more reasons to report all this to the ministry Harry? What if he's hurting Hermione right as we speak?"

"Ron, let's just get our facts straight first. Now we need to go see the editor of the Prophet. Maybe he'll know who sent those pictures in and they'll be able to confirm if they're real or fake," said Harry before he pulled his friend along. "If he tells us that those images are real, then we'll know for sure that McLaggen has her. We find him, we find her and we'll be able to prove that she didn't leave of her own accord."

"But we already know she didn't leave of her own accord. She loved her sons and she loved that pig-headed Slytherin, Harry. Either McLaggen is blackmailing her, or he's got her under some type of spell," the red-head said impatiently.

Harry let out a sigh. "I know that Ron, but she may be in some type of danger and we need a plan to save her. Not to mention, we don't even know where either one of them is at the moment. Let's just be a little patient. We'll find her Ron. Have faith."

Ron ran a hand through his hair and nodded. Harry was right and he needed to keep a cool head during all this, or else they were risking losing Hermione forever.

He stared at the rim of his glass, half-filled with the best and most expensive firewhiskey ever made. That also meant that it was the hardest liquor in the wizarding world. It didn't matter that it was still early in the morning, or that he usually saw to his sons when they woke up every day. No, at the moment he didn't care about anything but the pictures that had been printed on the day's edition of the Prophet.

He had wanted to believe in her so bad. In her and on Potter's words that Hermione would never leave behind the children she had fought so hard to protect while they grew inside of her. What else could he believe now, as he gazed at Hermione, his beautiful Gryffindor, eagerly kissing Cormac McLaggen? What hurt the most was the fact that she really had abandoned them for another man. Maybe, if she had just simply talked to him about her wanting to be with another man, maybe it wouldn't have been so painful. But her betrayal was far worse this way.

Draco no longer cared about what Harry Potter and Ron Weasley thought. Even if Hermione came back, once she remembered that she had given birth to her sons, he would never let her back into their lives. Their sons were now only his, and if she even thought of taking them away, he would fight her tooth and nail, and he would drag her through the mud if he had to. He knew he never should have trusted her in the first place. Sure, he had blackmailed her into marrying him and had generally made her life a living hell for nearly a year, but now they were even. He let out a bark of bitter laughter after taking a large gulp of his whiskey.

They were bloody fucking even.

From this day on, Hermione Granger was dead to him.

Hermione woke with a start, breathing ragged and head pounding. There was a disgusting taste in her mouth and she sat up slowly, lethargically. She nearly screamed when she saw that McLaggen was sitting right by the bed, watching her. He looked smug and pleased with himself, as if he had accomplished a great deed that she knew nothing of.

"What are you doing here?" she croaked.

Cormac smiled pleasantly, making goosebumps run down her spine. "I was watching you sleep. You have no idea how beautiful you really are, do you?" he let out a rueful laugh. "We were always meant to be, but you chose Weasley above me. Then Malfoy. Malfoy, Hermione. He never did appreciate you the way I did."

Sweet Merlin, Hermione thought, please don't let him go psycho. I really don't want to be hacked into a million pieces before my sons turn one. She moved away from him and stood, barely noticing that she was still wearing the dress from the night before. Why was it that she couldn't remember anything after drinking the wine? Her eyes snapped to McLaggen when she noted the smirk on his face. "What did you do?" she hissed. "What did you do to me? I can't remember anything after dinner," she spat, marching to stand in front of him.

"Well, unfortunately I didn't do anything to you of that sort. I want you to remember the first time that we're together. But really, it's a shame you don't remember how many kisses you gave me willingly." He chuckled at the look of fury on her face. "I'm in a good mood today, so I'll remind you. Here," he said, tossing the paper at her.

Hermione tried to force her shaking hands to steady before she pulled open the paper and looked down. The blood drained from her face as she looked at the various images of her and McLaggen, standing outside of the house and kissing passionately. When had this happened? Her brain was running a mile a minute. The only way he could've gotten her to do this was by a love potion, or using the imperio on her.

Before she could stop to think of the consequences, her fist was sailing towards his face with so much force that he fell backwards with a grunt, his head hitting the wall behind him. "You son of a bitch!" she screamed, hurling the paper at him as he tried to stand up. There was nothing in the room that she could use as a weapon except for her fists.

He stood and came at her, blood trickling out of the corner of his mouth. Hermione cried out when he returned her punch and her vision tilted. Then his hands were on her arms, and she was kicking and scratching him anywhere she could. He yelled out profanities when her nails raked down the side of his face, nearly reaching his left eye. He shoved her down onto her bed and overpowered her with a slap that rattled her teeth. Back when the war had been going on, she had been able to take on any man, but she hadn't trained her fighting skills in a few months, including the ones she had been in captivity, so Hermione realized that she was getting soft. Also, she hadn't been eating the way she was supposed to, and that affected her strength as well.

"Let go of me you bastard!" Hermione screamed as her nails dug into anything she could reach. "Don't touch me!" Her blood froze when he used one hand to pull back her hair painfully while the other began to inch up her dress. "No! Don't!"

Cormac watched her struggle and smiled in satisfaction. "I've been waiting a long time for this, sweetheart, and I don't care if it's forced," he said, his hand sliding up her thigh as she thrashed underneath him.

"No! Don't do this Cormac, please! I'll cooperate any way you want if you don't force me!" she cried.

Cormac stopped and looked at her. "You'll cooperate? Promise?" he asked her seriously.

Hermione nodded quickly. "Yes. Just... please don't do this," she nearly choked. But if he didn't take her against her will, she wouldn't care about using 'please' on this psychotic man.

"Fine," he said before bending down and running his lips over her cheekbone. "But if you keep acting up, we're going to continue where we stopped here," he murmured before getting off of her and smoothing out his clothes.

Hermione sat up quickly and pulled the dress down to cover her bare thighs. She could feel the beginnings of tears burning in her eyes, but she would be damned if she cried in front of him, even after his attempted rape.

"He doesn't love you, Hermione," Cormac said as he walked towards the door. "And I'll prove it to you," he said before he was gone.

She stared at the door for a long moment and swallowed back the tears of anger and frustration. Though she didn't want to lose her faith in Draco, even she would probably think that she and McLaggen were an item if she had been looking at the situation from outside. He would probably believe that she had abandoned their sons to be with McLaggen. Sod it, she needed to get out anyway possible. She had to find a way.

Daphne checked her lipstick for the third time as she waited to see Draco. She knew that he wouldn't want to see her, but she was not going to leave. This was her chance to take

advantage of the situation, while he was vulnerable and cursing Granger's very existence. She looked up when he stepped into the sitting room, looking as handsome as ever.

"Hello, love," she said with a soft smile. "How are you doing?"

Draco looked at her coolly before he shrugged. "How can I help you?" he asked instead.

Daphne smiled inwardly. Already he was colder than she remembered. With a little luck, he would remember how he had been during his teenage years. He hadn't let anything or anyone get in his way. That had been her favorite Draco. The man he had been when he had married Hermione had been too soft to her liking. But it appeared that that man was dead. Even if Granger ever managed to escape, she wouldn't be coming back to the same Draco Malfoy.

She sashayed over to him in a green dress that brought out her curves and her eyes, giving him a pouty look that drove many men crazy. "I'm sorry about those pictures in the paper. I know how... attached you were to Granger. I just didn't believe she would ever be capable of leaving you and your spawn behind," she said in a breathy voice, sliding a hand up his chest to his shoulder.

"That's not something that I'm willing to discuss with you," he replied coldly.

Daphne nodded and smiled in understanding. "Why not show her that you aren't in pain over her betrayal?" she murmured, lips close to his.

Draco grunted. "How do you suggest we do that?" he asked. But he already knew. He was still a Slytherin at heart and he had known his companions for what they were back in school. Any Slytherin would look for revenge in the most obvious way. But if Hermione had left willingly to be with McLaggen, why would she care if he was with someone else? Maybe she wouldn't care, but Potter and Weasel still believed that Granger hadn't left of their own accord. Striking one of the Golden Trio was like striking them all. And though he wasn't ready to admit it to anyone, not even to himself, he was in pain and he wanted to hurt whoever had been close to Hermione. And he didn't care how he did it.

Daphne smirked when he turned to face her and brought his lips to hers. She knew he was allowing her this for revenge purposes only, but it didn't matter. As long as she upped one over Granger, she would pay any price. When the Gryffindor got her eyes on next morning's paper, she would hate Draco as much as he hated her.

Cormac would be so proud of her.

Again she was seated at the dinner table with him, but she had refused to eat or drink anything he prepared until he tried it himself. Satisfied that there were no love potions or any type of brain-addling potions in any of the food and drinks, she ate very little and refused to join in on his conversation. Really, the man was as self-centered as he had always been.

Hermione let out a deep breath and wrung on the napkin in her lap. This was only the second time she had been in the living room of McLaggen's house, so she took the moment to take in the position of the furniture and her possible escape routes. Her memory had always been good, so she would memorize all that she was seeing within minutes. Behind McLaggen was the door to the kitchen, where her room/cell could be accessed by a narrow stairwell that went

up three flights. There was a hallway to the left of the kitchen door that moved to one of the back doors.

Behind the place where she was sitting was the main door and foyer, as well as the main staircase that would lead one up to the bedrooms. If she ever did succeed in escaping her room, she would have a long way to run for either the back or front door. But though Harry and Ron had always been faster at flying, she had always been quicker on her feet than either of the boys. As long as there was no magic involved, she would be able to outrun McLaggen.

"You aren't eating," said Cormac after taking a sip of wine. He wasn't stupid. He had seen her inspecting possible escape routes, but he was confident that it wouldn't happen. She wouldn't be able to leave her room, or the cell in the dungeons.

Hermione let out an irritated sigh. "I'm not very hungry," she nearly spat.

Cormac just smirked and shrugged one shoulder. "That's your loss. This food is simply divine," he replied calmly.

She felt her eyes burn with angry tears despite the way she had been steeling herself during her confrontations with McLaggen. She had refused to show him her weak moments. "Take me back, Cormac, please," she stressed.

He shook his head and wouldn't meet her eyes. "I can't do that."

"I miss my sons. They need me. Don't you even feel remotely guilty that they have been without their mother for all these months?" she pleaded. "They're just babies, and they are what I love most in this world!" Hermione said, gasping out tearfully at the memories of her sons. They had been without her for months now. They had grown without her. More tears came then, but McLaggen just shook his head.

"Isn't Malfoy one of the things you love most as well?" he muttered.

Hermione refused to answer that question, knowing that it would only serve to make things worse. "Right now all that matters to me is getting back to my sons. They can't grow up without me."

Cormac eyed her with a pitying look now before he pulled out the Daily Prophet from the inside of his coat. "It's a good thing that only your sons matter to you because Malfoy has been having fun since I took you away. I guess that his love for you wasn't as real and as strong as we were all led to believe in the papers those months after your divorce."

Against herself, Hermione was curious to know what he was getting at. "What are you talking about?" she asked slowly.

McLaggen handed over the paper and watched her with a barely restrained smirk as she looked at the pictures over with narrowed eyes. She was currently looking at newly published images of her husband enjoying a stroll and a kiss with Daphne. He was smirking at the blonde woman, looking faintly amused as she cuddle up next to him. Hermione's eyes blinked but no more tears would come out. She couldn't believe those pictures. They could've been staged like hers were with McLaggen. She wasn't going to believe them.

"They're real, sweetheart," said Cormac. "Daphne has used no potions to make him love her. He's doing this because of the pictures of us. He's doing it because he thinks that you and I are together. But still, if he really cared for you, he wouldn't have believed those pictures. He would be finding a way to get you back. But he hasn't, and he won't. He has Daphne now," he said in a low, evil voice.

Hermione simply stood. "I'm going to my room," she said flatly, refusing to listen to any more of his words.

"Sit. Down." His voice was a low growl, commanding and promising punishment if she didn't comply.

She was tired of him. Tired of his commands. Tired of thinking that Draco, Harry, and Ron would find a way to locate her and take her back to her sons. Tired. Tired. Tired. She picked up her glass of wine and hurled the liquid into McLaggen's face, not caring for the consequences that were sure to come. He came to his feet with a snarl, backhanding her. Hermione grunted with the impact, but then grabbed the plate and crashed it over his head, before reaching blindly for a fork.

They fought tooth and nail with each other, and Hermione grabbed the fork tighter and jammed it into his thigh before slamming a fist into his cheek. Then she took off running for the main door as McLaggen cursed her in pain and jerked the fork out of his leg. Then he stood, forgoing his wand and tackled her down when she was just a few feet from the door.

She slammed her elbow into his face repeatedly, hearing the satisfying crunch of his nose, and probably getting one of his eyes as well. All that was on her mind now was making him pay for what he was doing to her. Depriving her of her freedom, forcing her into submission—though at least he hadn't raped her—and keeping her from her sons which was the worse one of them all. She was so angry at the moment that she didn't even care if she killed him, or if he killed her.

They got to their feet again, but McLaggen took the opportunity to slam her back against a large, framed mirror on the wall. The glass behind her head and body broke into pieces, and the shards that fell around her were covered in dots of blood from her arms and head. She was also bleeding from her temple, and her arms were bruised and scratched.

"You're going to pay for this, Hermione. I'm sick and tired of you," Cormac spat. "I'm going to let you stew in your blood, maybe starve you a little, and when you learn your lesson, I will teach you to be obedient," he said before dragging her down to the dark, dank cell in the dungeons.

Hermione just followed limply, not replying to him. She was slightly disoriented from her head wounds and couldn't formulate a reply. The next time he let her out of that damned cell, she would either take him down permanently, or die trying.

Lavender watched her husband pace her office in the ministry. No matter how much she tried to reassure herself that there was nothing going on between him and Hermione Granger, the doubt had been there from the moment he had accepted her into his life. Hermione had always been such a big part of Ron's heart, she couldn't help but wonder if his worry and anger were because he still loved her that way.

"You still love her, don't you?" her mouth asked without her permission.

Ron stopped to look at her with a frown on his handsome face. "What?"

"Is that why you're so worried? Tell me. I promise I won't get mad," she said with a sigh.

The red head shook his head once before stepping over to his wife and pulling her into his arms. "Of course I love her, sweetheart. But not in the way that you are implying. I will admit that it took me a while to get over her, but I got over her because of you. You were there to help me," he said gently.

"Then why are you acting this way? Would you be pacing and worried if I had disappeared instead?" she asked him softly.

Ron pulled back to look at her and saw the doubt in her pretty eyes. "Lav, Hermione is my sister regardless of what we went through. She's been a part of my life since my childhood and I am worried that she is in danger. Yes, I loved her the way I love you now, but that was a long time ago. If you disappeared, I would destroy anyone and anything that ever laid a hand on you because you are my wife and the woman I love. Hermione is my sister, and she is a part of me the way Harry is. I'm this worried because Harry found evidence that she was kidnapped. Those pictures in the paper are staged as well. I know Hermione better than anyone and she never would've abandoned her infant sons."

"She left you to protect your family," Lavender added to his reasoning. "She's always done things to protect others."

Ron nodded, a smile on his face now that Lavender was understanding his way of thinking. "McLaggen has disappeared and he didn't say where he would be going. Harry is filing a report with the ministry, as we speak, but he's having a hard time convincing them that Hermione was kidnapped without proof. All we have is the blood found in her flat, and the fact that McLaggen has disappeared with the excuse of being on a vacation. We've checked all of his properties, but he's at none of the ones registered publicly."

"I may be able to help," Lavender said, lowering her voice.

"How?" her husband asked, hope blooming in his chest.

"I can get fired for this Ron," she said with a heavy sigh. "But I guess that it'll be worth it if you and Harry are right about her being kidnapped. We have private records—confidential records—here about every Wizard living in this country and the properties that they own. There are many witches and wizards who own estates and homes left to them by their ancestors, or when a man leaves his mistress a home that he doesn't want his wife to know about. I can look into the properties that McLaggen has in private—that are not in public records, but I don't know how long it will take, or if I will be able to find anything," Lavender said.

Ron kissed her. "Honey, that's the best news you could've given me today. And don't worry about getting fired. They won't fire the woman who helped find where Hermione Granger was kept against her will. Harry and I won't let that happen. And though he hates the power he has, Harry can do whatever it is he wants to do with the ministry if he wanted. I would've been worried about abusing power if it had been anyone but Harry, but he would never do such a thing. Nevermind that, just get working on it as soon as you can. I'll see you at home," he said before kissing her again.

"Where are you going now?" she asked curiously.

"Harry asked me to meet him at Malfoy's Manor. We have a few things to talk about with him," said Ron darkly.

"Be safe and don't get into trouble," Lavender said, hugging him.

"Don't worry about me, love," he replied with a grin.

Lavender sighed heavily. Knowing Ron and Harry, she should be worried. Especially after the latest images of Draco Malfoy cavorting with Daphne Greengrass the Prophet had printed just that morning.

Draco was sick and tired of Potter and Weasel. They were waiting for him in his office, and he knew why. It was irritating to him, but he guessed it would serve to relieve some of the pent up stress and aggravation. The weasel would be a very convenient punching bag. He made his way down to the office, ignoring the looks from his father and mother, who had been on Hermione's side from the start.

When he entered the office, he didn't wait long to have a go at the red head. He was on him in seconds and then there was war. Potter did not interfere, and a dark part of Draco had wanted him to, so that he could knock that look off of the other man's face as well. He gave as good as he got, and in the end, after several broken pieces of furniture and bleeding limbs, Potter finally split them apart with his wand.

"You bloody bastard!" Ron screamed at him. "McLaggen kidnapped her! The blood Harry found on a broken vase in her apartment belonged to Hermione and to a different source!"

"What the hell are you talking about, weasel? You never did make much sense," replied Draco with a drawl, wincing at a cut on his lip.

Harry shook his head in pity. "We're going to find her. Didn't you stop to think that Hermione was never a person to run away from her problems or from the ones she loves? She let go of Ron because you forced her to, but also because she loved him and his family enough to sacrifice her heart for them. Did you stop and think that those pictures in the paper were staged? McLaggen has disappeared from the face of the planet. Shouldn't that tell you something obvious?"

"All it tells me is that they had been planning this for a while. If you can't find either of them, it's because they don't want to be found, you fool," Draco said with a sneer.

Ron shook his head in disbelief. "She's going to hate you when we find her and we prove that she was indeed kidnapped. I feel sorry for you Malfoy, because you will never be able to fix what you have now broken," he said before making for the door.

Harry looked at Draco and let out a heavy sigh. "I'll tell her that you had faith in her at first, but then you didn't believe that she wouldn't be capable of doing any of this. Ron is right, she is going to hate and she will never forgive all that you have done to her. Not this time," he said before he walked out as well.

"I'm not asking for her sodding forgiveness. I won't ever!" he spat out to no one but himself. "She and McLaggen can rot in hell for all I care."

But his heart was pleading with him to think otherwise. Deep in his heart, deep deep down, he knew that he was making a mistake. But it was too late for him to go back. He sat down and felt his eyes burn unfamiliarly. He was not going to shed a tear for her. He was a Malfoy, and Malfoy's didn't cry. Not even when their heart's had been broken beyond repair.

Looking through the room that had alternated as her prison along with the cell in the dungeons, Hermione had found nothing to use as a weapon. He had kept her in the cell for another month. He gave her one meal a day and had refused to allow her to clean up. Her wounds had healed on their own as well, and there had been dried blood on her face and in her hair. She had smelled worse than anything she could remember before the bastard had let her back into the bedroom to shower and to wear clean clothes.

She continued to look around the room. Really, if she did manage to knock out McLaggen, how would she get out of the room without magic or a key? She walked into the bathroom and inspected every little corner. Little plastic containers didn't make good weapons, and neither did toothbrushes, unless she wanted to stab him in the eye. That would only serve to piss him off, not knock him down and out.

The bathtub and showerhead were firmly in place and all she had to cover herself when she showered was a curtain. No glass doors she could break to use as a weapon. Her eyes then scanned to where a towel was hanging on a metal rod. She moved forward quickly and tested to see if it would loosen. It did. She pulled and turned it until it was loose and finally came off. Her brain was screaming at her for not finding it sooner, but still, McLaggen spent a lot of time in the house and he visited her a random amount of times during the day. If she managed to break a window, or even the door to get out, he would hear it immediately and stop her chance of escaping.

That was not going to happen. She had been away from her sons for nearly four months and she would not stay any longer. Unfortunately for her, the woman once called 'the fearless Gryffindor princess,' her biggest fear was on the other side of the window. She was currently located on the second floor of a huge Manor. Once she managed to break a window, it would be a long way down. A long road to breaking an arm, a leg, or her neck. She was also thinking that even if she was able to tie the curtains, bed sheets, and some towels together, she would still have a long, dangerous way down.

She ran towards the bed she had occupied less than the floor in the cell, and placed the towel rod between the mattress and the base. It wasn't the wisest place to put it, but there was nowhere else safer. The doorknob of her room turned and she froze, thankful that she had put away the bar on time.

McLaggen waltzed in, as if he were the king of the world and everyone bowed down before him. Hermione just crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him darkly. What she wouldn't give for the chance to wipe that infuriating look off of his face. "I want you to shower and get ready. We're having a very romantic dinner tonight, you and I. I will go into town to buy you a new dress that I want you to wear tonight. A beautiful..." he said slowly, circling her and touching her neck. "...red, silk, sexy dress..." he ended with a purr, trying to press a kiss to her cheek.

"Tonight, your punishment for stabbing me will begin. I warned you, Hermione. Now you will reap the consequences of your actions."

Hermione tried not to recoil, but still her head jerked back without her being able to stop herself. She pulled on a sickeningly sweet smile. "Be a dear and buy me some books to read? Despite your lovely attentions, I am bored and I have nothing else to do but pace and think of my sons and my ex-husband kissing that conniving hussy you were once married to," she sneered.

McLaggen scowled but then nodded. "Fine. Maybe I'll buy you some trashy romance novels to get you in the mood," he said evilly, not missing the disgusted look that crossed her pretty features.

"Go screw yourself, McLaggen," she snapped, turning her back to him.

He just chuckled and moved towards the door. "Don't go anywhere now," he said sardonically, another laugh escaping him before he shut the door.

"Laugh it up, you pig," she muttered to herself. She sat down on the bed and waited for what seemed like hours but was only about ten minutes. How was she to know if he was still in the house? She walked towards her door and pounded on it. If she called him, he eventually answered. "Cormac McLaggen! I want to talk to you!" she yelled at the door in the loudest voice she could muster.

When there was no answer after five minutes, she ran to the bathroom and gathered all the towels she could, moving them to the bed as she began her task of tying everything together. Then she tore down the curtains and did the same before tying everything off to the foot of the bed, which appeared to be the heaviest piece of furniture in the room. Then she brought out the towel rod and moved towards the window, praying that he had been foolish enough to leave them alone and that he hadn't fortified them with charms.

She swung with all her strength and tried to shield her eyes at the same moment, but it seemed that the glass was thicker than average and all she accomplished was a slight dent. Cursing foully enough to make an American sailor proud, she swung many times until she could use her feet, wrapped in a towel, to kick the glass outward, her heart pumping in her chest as she got the hole big enough to fit through. She ran to the bed and grabbed the sheets that she had tied as tight as possible. She swung it over and poked her head out to see how much she would have to jump. Tears sprung to her eyes when she realized that she would end up breaking at least one limb.

Hermione cursed when the glass cut into her hands, but she wasn't about to stop now, when she was so close to her escape. As she sent a quick prayer to God, or any type of deity that could help her, she began to climb down, leaving red stains on the white sheets from the painful cuts in her hands. Once she reached the end of them all, she looked down and almost fainted. It looked so much higher now that she was at the end of the sheets.

It was now or never. McLaggen was sure to be nearby and if he saw her, he would lock her up again and make her punishment far worse than he had promised. No. No, McLaggen would not have his way with her. She would see her sons again. She would live and be free to curse Draco into oblivion. She let go of her makeshift rope and fell with a muffled scream. She tried to roll on the impact, but she fell on her wrist and knew that she had broken it. But she couldn't dwell on it. Not now. She ran towards the forest, realizing that they had really been in the middle

of nowhere.

She didn't care if she died in the wilderness. Or if she encountered a dragon, or some other creature in that part of the country they were in. She needed to get away from McLaggen. She needed to find someone who would help her get back home. As the branches cut into her face and arms, Hermione grunted in pain, trying to protect her wrist.

She turned to look back to see how far she had gotten, but then a pair of arms closed around her and she let loose a scream fit to wake the dead. She had been caught.

Noooooooo! How was that for a chapter ending? I know you're all going to curse me because of the way things are going, but we're about two to three chapters away from an ending, and it WILL be a happy one, so rest assured people. Really, thank you very much for the reviews, and really, I'm sorry if you don't like where it's going, but I do, so I get the majority vote here. Don't wanna piss anyone off, because I love you guys, but come on, what good is a fic if you don't have angst and drama? Hmm? Anyway, next up is Hermione's captor. Who could it be? Can't tell you guys, so tune in for the next chapter! Have a great week people, and I hope to see you all soon!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 20: Never Meant To Be

But no matter how I try

I can't hate you anymore

Hermione stifled a shriek as strong arms came around her and held her tightly as she struggled in his grip. "Hermione! Hermione, please stop!" Ron yelled at her.

She suddenly froze and stared up at him, tears springing to her eyes. No words would come out of her mouth, no matter how hard she tried. She stopped to look around them and saw that Harry and Blaise were also there, along with a few Aurors who were spread out. "H-how did you find me?" she finally managed to ask, momentarily forgetting the pain in her wrist. Maybe she was imagining things?

"We've been trying to find clues for weeks, sweetheart," said Blaise as he came up behind her.

Harry nodded and hugged her tightly. They had informed Blaise of their findings when he had asked for Hermione many times, knowing that she wouldn't ever leave her sons. He frowned when she flinched after he tried to take her hands. "Did he do this to you?" he asked seriously, calling one of the healers to come take a look at her bleeding palms and her broken wrist.

Hermione shook her head and couldn't force down the tears that kept slipping down her cheeks. "I found a way to break through the window of the room he had me locked in. I couldn't use any magic so I tied many sheets and towels together and climbed down. I cut my hands on the glass and then fell on my wrist when I jumped the rest of the way. There was no way of me getting out of the room, even without my wand because he had the land cancel out my magic or something. He's been keeping me in the dungeon in a cell when I don't cooperate with him."

The healer cured her wounds and healed her wrist before conjuring a brace and placing her hand inside for a few hours until they could get Hermione some potions to help. Harry turned to her again. "Did he hurt you physically?" he asked her gently.

Hermione nodded. "We got into really nasty fights a few times. He never raped me, but he did slap me around a bit, though it was never as bad as what I did to him. He had me take a love potion so that he could get those pictures put in the paper. Daphne was in on it from the beginning. She's helped him in everything he has done to me," she said darkly.

Ron ran a hand up and down her back in a soothing manner. "We need to get her out of her and to Mungo's before she can see her sons."

She shook her head. "No, I want to stay and see when you get McLaggen. Please," she said when her two best friends started to shake their heads and began to voice their disapproval. "I have earned this. I have to see the look on his face when you tell him that he's going to rot in prison for the rest of his life," she said with barely restrained fury.

Harry looked to the Aurors and gave them a nod. "Fine, but as soon as he's apprehended, we're going to take you to the hospital."

"If I weren't in pain right now, I'd go straight to see my sons, but I need to see this," Hermione said quietly. "But we have to hurry. He'll be back soon," she said as they began to trudge back to what had been her prison for months. McLaggen wouldn't know what hit him.

Cormac smirked to himself as he apparated straight into his home. He had free reign to use his magic because they were on unplottable land that had cancelled off any witches power. Of course, he hadn't shared that with Hermione or even Daphne because it was a sort of family secret. He set down his packages on the dinner table and walked off to check on Hermione in her room. He couldn't wait for dinner and what would come afterwards.

He nearly ran up the steps to her room and opened the door without a noise. The sight that met him made his blood run cold. He yelled out a string of curses that his mother would've slapped him for and ran to the window to look out. There was a makeshift rope hanging a long distance down, and from then on she would've had to jump. A jump like that would've hurt an unprepared person, and Cormac spotted the blood on the glass of the broken window. She was hurt, and most likely traveling slow. She would not get away from him so easily.

He ran out of her room and down the stairs, his mind conjuring up the thoughts of what he would do to her once he found her. She would pay for giving him so much trouble and he would make her beg for his mercy. As he was making his way to the front door, his eyes met an unusual sight.

Hermione was standing in front of him, her arm in a sling and a cold look on her face. "Welcome

back, Cormac."

"How did you get back in here? I would've thought that you would be long gone from here," he said coolly. She shrugged and watched him calmly as he took a few steps towards her. "You've been a very bad girl Hermione, and you're going to pay for causing me so much grief," he said softly. His hand came up to grab her around her neck and suddenly he was on the other end of roughly ten wands.

"Guess who found me?" she asked smugly.

McLaggen stared at the livid faces of Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. Their expressions promised worlds of pain in store for him after what he did to their precious third. "Where's Malfoy?" he asked smugly. He wouldn't be going down without a fight, even if it was only with words.

Hermione felt something burn behind her eyes, but she would rather off herself than allow McLaggen to see her tears ever again. Before any of the men could react, she drew back her good hand and let the fist fly towards Cormac's face. The man grunted and fell back as his nose spouted blood down his face and clothes. Harry then hauled him up and Hermione kicked him in his lower extremities, watching in satisfaction as he cried out like a little girl and fell to his knees in pain, not know whether to nurse his still bleeding nose or his aching crotch.

"Cormac McLaggen, by order of the ministry of magic, you are under arrest for the kidnapping of Hermione Granger. Anything you say may be used against you in the court of the Wizengamot," said one of the Aurors, not commenting on what Hermione had just done to the man. If asked about it later, he would say that they hadn't seen anything and that the prisoner was crying wolf.

"I'm going to make sure you and Daphne rot in prison for the rest of your days," Harry spat as he held Hermione away from him, lest she damage the man permanently. He turned to the Aurors and nodded. "You can take him away. Hermione will go file the report tomorrow morning after she sees her sons and gets rest. I trust you all to start the paperwork?"

"Yes, Mr. Potter," said one of the youngest ones. "We will question the prisoner as soon as we get to the Ministry and we will be waiting for you tomorrow, Ms. Granger," he said before they hauled off McLaggen so that they could apparate out.

Blaise walked over to her and kissed her forehead. "I'm happy you're safe, love. But now I have to go make sure that McLaggen gets hit with everything the law has. It's really important that you file the report tomorrow morning. Usually a victim must make the report at the moment, but you're Hermione Granger and the Ministry will make an exception. Just don't forget that tomorrow you must be there. If you have no objections, I would like to represent you in all of this," he told her seriously.

She managed a smile. "Thank you, and your help is greatly appreciated. I will be at the ministry tomorrow morning at nine, is that okay?" she asked him. Blaise nodded and bid her goodbye before walking away.

"Let's go," said Ron as he took Hermione's arm and walked her towards the chimney where there was floo powder. "The Aurors and St. Mungos have to make a report on your injuries before they heal you."

Hermione nodded and took a handful of floo powder before she found herself in the hospital. Harry and Ron came up behind her and ushered her towards the emergency section of the hospital where she would be taken care of. The Healers moved quickly when they saw who they would be taking care of, and an hour later, Hermione was almost as good as new, save for a few bruises on her neck and face that would have to fade on their own.

Hermione sat on the hospital bed, showered and changed into clean clothes that Ron had gone to get from her flat. She was wearing a pair of old blue jeans and a long, blue sweater which had been the only things that Ron had found for her to wear. The question had been there in the back of her mind from the moment her friends had caught her in the forest. She needed to know. Ron and Harry were looking at each other and then at her.

"Just tell me," she said with a heavy sigh. "Are the pictures in the paper true?"

Harry cleared his throat and walked over to sit next to her where she was gazing at the bruises and the scars on her palms. "He said that he was doing it because it was obvious that you had moved on. Mione, he had faith in you in the beginning, but then—"

"Then he saw the pictures," she finished for him. Her friends nodded but offered no other words as the room fell into silence. "He thinks I would be capable of abandoning my sons for another man," she said as a few tears trailed down her cheeks.

"What are you going to tell him when you're face to face?" Ron asked quietly.

"He'll fight me, I know that much. But my sons belong to me. I'm trying to come to terms with the fact that things will never be the same between me and Draco, but I won't hate him for the things he will say. I'll just... I don't know. I'll try to explain to him what happened, and if he doesn't want to listen, we'll fight," she said sadly.

"Will you forgive him for what he's done?" Harry asked as he took her hand in his.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know yet. I won't know until we actually come face to face," she said. Then her mood brightened slightly. "Have you two seen my sons?"

Ron nodded and smiled slightly. "We always visited when Malfoy wasn't there. Your ex-mother-in-law let us spend some time with your kids. She always believed that something was amiss and that you wouldn't willingly leave the babies."

Hermione nodded and felt more tears trail down her face. She had no response to that, though her heart felt a little lighter now that she knew that her sons had been taken care of. The healer in charge of her finally walked into the room with the paperwork she needed to sign in order to discharge her. When Hermione stepped out of her private room, she saw that at the welcome desk, there were some Aurors blocking the way for some reporters. As soon as they saw Hermione, Harry, and Ron, they started to call out questions about her kidnapping and McLaggen's arrest.

"How did they get wind of this so fast?" asked Ron as he ushered her to the floo again.

"I don't really care," Hermione said in annoyance. She turned to her best friends. "Wait for me at my flat, won't you? I want to do confront Draco alone," she told them seriously.

"But Hermione—" Harry protested. If Malfoy hadn't seen the reports in today's paper, he wouldn't welcome Hermione in his home or near their sons. She really shouldn't do this alone.

"No, Harry. I'm so thankful that you guys saved me, and that Blaise is going to make sure that McLaggen rots in prison, but I need to do this alone. I don't want you two to be there to hear what will be said," she said with a sad smile. Then she grabbed a handful of floo and called out her destination before either of her friends could object.

The Manor was quiet when she arrived and as she approached the staircase, she froze when she saw Draco coming down the stairs. He stopped when he saw her too, blinking a few times before he kept walking to come to a stop in front of her. The look in his eye was cold and it made the words die in Hermione's throat. He looked so cold and... he reminded Hermione of how he had been in school. "Draco—" she started, but didn't get anything else out because he was suddenly gripping her arm and pulling her towards the main door.

"You and I have nothing to talk about. You've been gone for months and suddenly you're back here. Go back to McLaggen, you are not wanted here," he spat before he opened the door and shoved her outside before she could even utter another word.

He slammed the door behind her and let out a heavy breath, feeling his heart squeezing in his chest after what he had done. He hadn't even noticed the lingering bruises on her skin and the fact that she was paler and leaner than the last time he had seen her. He couldn't feel guilty about throwing her out of his home. She had walked out of their lives four months ago. Their sons had been growing without her. He wasn't going to feel guilty.

Hermione stared at the door for a few seconds before she stifled a sob and sat on the steps a distance away. She sat there crying for what felt like hours but was more than likely a few minutes, during which it had started to rain above her. Could she really forgive him for what he had just done to her? She honestly didn't know. All they seemed to do was hurt each other, and maybe if she hadn't been so stubborn before, they would've been together and McLaggen never would've kidnapped her, but she wouldn't take the entire blame for what they were going through. She wouldn't take the blame for the fact that Draco was an insecure little bastard who hadn't believed enough in her.

"Hermione?"

She looked up with a start and turned to see who was addressing her. Her eyes flew wide and she stood, completely soaked because of the rain to see Lucius Malfoy standing just inside the door. That was the first time he had ever addressed her by her first name. When she had married Draco, it had always been 'girl.' After the divorce, he had called her Ms. Granger. "You're on his side?" she asked him.

Lucius shook his head once. "No, but I saw what happened just now. I had to wait for him to leave the house before I could come out here to speak to you. Come in and get dried before you go see your sons."

Hermione smiled slightly and walked into the foyer, taking out her wand so that she could dry herself. When she was done she looked at Lucius. "Thank you. For letting me in and for not believing all that junk in the paper."

"We just received the latest edition where McLaggen was seen in the ministry, being

apprehended for kidnapping you. There were also images of you leaving a room at St. Mungos. Unfortunately, Draco did not see them before you arrived, and has not seen them yet. He left a few minutes ago," Lucius replied as they walked up the stairs.

Hermione's heart was pounding as she neared the room where her sons were. Her heart was threatening to burst from her chest because she hadn't seen them in so long. What if they had forgotten about her in the months that she had been gone? She wasn't even aware that she had stopped outside of the nursery until she felt a gentle hand on her shoulder. Hermione looked up and came face to face with Narcissa.

"Your friends came by whenever they could. Every time they showed the boys your picture and talked to them about you. They never lost faith in you, Hermione, and neither did Lucius and I. They may have grown accustomed to being without you all this time, but a child never forgets their mother. Go in and see them," she said kindly.

Hermione nodded and entered the room. Not much had changed, except that now the cribs were slightly larger and the toys were more for bigger babies. She moved slowly towards one crib and saw that Darius was playing calmly with some plastic rings and a few soft toys for him to gum on. His hair was still as richly brown as hers, but his features had taken more of his father. He looked up and stared at her with his big, beautiful, nearly silver eyes. She reached in shakily and pulled him into her arms. The baby watched her for a few seconds before he gave her a smile that almost melted her then and there. Her twins were nine months old already, but it appeared that Darius hadn't forgotten who she was.

She walked over to the other crib and saw that Darien was fast asleep. She placed her son in the playpen that was nearby and moved over to pick up the sleeping baby to cradle him gently for a moment. He snuggled into her arms and kept sleeping. Hermione rocked him a few times before placing him back in his crib and letting him sleep. She wanted so much to have him awake and in her arms, but she was considerate and knew that he would be cranky if he didn't complete his nap. She moved back to Darius and hugged him instead, her tears coming back with a vengeance.

She turned to Narcissa and Lucius, who had been watching her and sighed heavily. "You will both understand that I will take them with me, won't you? We'll you often and Draco can come see them, but they are my sons and I can't live without them," she said quietly.

Lucius nodded. "We understand, but I think you and my son have things to talk about. It won't be long before he sees the paper and corroborates the reports. He will come back and you will both need to settle this," he said.

Hermione nodded. "Where is he now?" she asked quietly.

Lucius looked uncomfortable for a moment before his face went blank. "He said he would visit Greengrass, but if I'm not mistaken, there were reports that she was McLaggen's accomplice?"

"Yes. She knew from the beginning and she helped him plan everything. She knew where I was all this time, and she was there to take the pictures that ended up in the papers," Hermione said angrily.

"I suppose that the Ministry will go arrest Daphne. I do hope it happened while Draco was there," said Narcissa as she shook her head slightly. "Hermione, why don't you put Darius to

sleep? It's past his nap time and you need to be calm for when Draco arrives. We'll have a cup of tea while I have the elves pack up the boys clothes and have it delivered to your flat."

Hermione nodded reluctantly and placed her son in his crib, rubbing his soft hair soothingly as the boy gazed up at her. She then leaned down to kiss his forehead before setting the rail of the crib higher and then walking off with Narcissa. It didn't matter how long she had to calm down. Whatever she and Draco would discuss was bound to be explosive.

Draco returned to the Manor an hour after he had left. He had been at Daphne's flat when the Aurors had arrived to arrest her for being an accomplice in the kidnapping of Hermione Granger. He had asked the head Auror about what had happened, and he had told Draco about Hermione's injuries and where she had been found. His heart had plummeted to his feet and he had been left stunned for a few minutes as his brain tried to catch up to what the man had said to him.

Potter and Weasley had been right. They had believed in Hermione when she had disappeared without a word, while he hadn't. While he had cursed her name and everything about her, she had been suffering through McLaggen's physical abuse until she had managed to escape and she had run straight into her friends and the Aurors. How could he look her in the face after what he had just done to her? He had told his father to not allow her back into the house, even after he had seen that it was raining outside and he had seen her sitting there, crying.

He had reluctantly made his way back to his home and as he walked towards the nursery where his sons had lived in the past four months, he stopped. She was sitting alone in the sitting room, watching him quietly. This time around, he took her in and noticed that she had lost some weight and that there were bruises around the pale skin of her neck as he neared her.

She stood once he reached her and before he knew it, his head snapped to the side, courtesy of her palm. He took it without a sound and said nothing to her as he turned to look at her again. She let out a deep breath and took a step away from him.

"I'm taking my sons with me. If you try to stop me, I will go to the ministry and do this legally," she said in a flat voice.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "For treating you the way I did when you arrived earlier. I won't justify what I did, but I believed the pictures I saw of you and McLaggen," he said.

"I figured you had, but Ron and Harry verified it. You know that while he had me kidnapped, he showed me the pictures of you and Daphne in the paper and I didn't believe them," she said, tears blurring her eyes. "I knew that like the images of me and McLaggen in paper, yours could've been staged as well. I kept my hope alive, that maybe, just maybe you would've believed in me the way I did you. I hoped that you were trying to find me, but you weren't. You were too busy plotting your retribution, getting into bed with Daphne to hurt me all the more when I decided to return. Well, I'm back, and you accomplished what you were hoping for."

"Hermione—" he started in a pleading tone.

She held up a hand to silence him and kept talking. "I will be the bigger person here. Despite all we went through, I won't hold this against you. Hell, had we been in reversed positions, I would've done the same. Maybe even something more painful. I can't forgive you just yet, but I

know in time I will. I don't hate you, Draco, and when I take my sons, you will be able to see them, but you and I are permanently over."

"Hermione, I'm sorry," Draco said guiltily. "I've always been too hardheaded for my own good, but... I won't try to convince you to take me back. Even I can see when I have hurt you beyond repair. I'm sorry I ruined your life so badly. I should've left you alone all those years ago," he said, turning his back to her.

Hermione sighed. "Don't apologize for forcing your way into my life. Without you, I wouldn't have been to have two beautiful children. I wouldn't change anything if it meant not having them," she said.

A horrible thought entered Draco's mind as he thought back to her bruises. "Hermione, did he... force you to... submit to him?" he asked, having trouble voicing the question.

"No," she replied, feeling relief wash over her at the same time. "He was about to. If I had stayed put another day in that house, he would've. But physical assault is all he ever got to do to me. I gave as good as I go though," she said with a bitter smile. "I stabbed his leg and nearly gauged out his eye once."

"We always do end up hurting each other no matter what we do, don't we?" he asked with a shake of his head.

"I believe that means that we're better off alone," she murmured, walking towards the staircase.

"Please forgive me, Hermione," he said, not turning to watch her go.

"With time Draco. Right now... I can't," she said before she walked up the steps to get her sons.

Draco ran a hand through his hair and marched into his office. He wouldn't be able to see her leave with their sons, not after their last words. He would let her be for a few days before he would visit their sons. She needed the time alone with the boys and he had no right to intrude on their time. He couldn't believe it. He had screwed up all chances of ever getting her back and she hadn't cursed him or cried. They were over. And this time he had a feeling that they were over for good. At that moment, he realized that maybe it would be the best for them both.

Meanwhile, Hermione had had to stop before reaching her sons room in order to sob without any questions. She and Draco were over. He hadn't pleaded for her to forgive him and take him back and he hadn't asked her to understand why he had thought that she had left them. It was for the best though. She would've been angry enough to hurt him had he tried to justify what he had done.

She wiped her eyes from the tears and walked into the nursery to find that both twins were awake now. Narcissa and Lucius were watching over them and they looked up when Hermione entered. "I'm going to take them now," she said, her voice cracking.

"Did you talk to Draco?" asked Lucius.

Hermione nodded and walked over to pick up her twins. "We came to an agreement regarding our relationship. There's no going back," she said, not bothering to elaborate. "Thank you both for believing in and for taking care of my sons. I will never forget what you have done and I will

forever be grateful," she said before she turned and walked out.

Lucius and Narcissa didn't follow her, instead they walked off to check on their own daughter as she took her own nap. Little Darlene would miss her nephews now that they would no longer live with her. Narcissa wondered how her son was taking all that had happened, and her heart went out to him. She just hoped that he wouldn't truly give Hermione up. She was the most amazing young person Narcissa had ever met, and she knew without a doubt that she was the key to Draco's happiness.

Hermione gazed down at the man in front of her coldly. He was passed out on the floor of his cell. She knew that she should've been complaining his treatment, because no matter what, he was still a human being, but after all the physical pain he had caused her, not to mention the mental and emotional pain as well, she didn't care if Harry and Ron came over to rough him up again.

Pointing her wand at him, Hermione conjured up a very cold stream of water and poured it directly on McLaggen's face. He sputtered for a few seconds before sitting up quickly, trying to snort out the water that had gone into his nose.

"Did you have pleasant dreams?" asked Hermione smugly.

"Bitch," he snarled, coming to his feet and limping slightly towards the bars on his cell. "Get me out of here or I swear I will kill you when I get out."

Hermione sighed. "What makes you think that you will ever get out of prison? What makes you think you'll live to see your freedom ever again?" she asked him snidely. "I have power in the Ministry," she whispered, closing the distance slightly. "But if it doesn't get me what I want, Harry will use his, and let's face it, he's the boy who lived and he gets everything he asks the Ministry for."

McLaggen glared at her then managed a smirk from his split lip. "It doesn't matter. The damage is done and I'll die happy in prison, knowing that you and Malfoy will never be together again. Did you know that as soon as he saw the pictures in the paper he didn't even wait a week to sleep with her?"

Hermione pursed her lips in rage but didn't allow him to see how much the comment had affected her. She had assumed he had been sleeping with Greengrass, but it was much more painful to have it thrown into her face by the man who had been so close to the other woman. "What if I forgive him, Cormac? Where will your victory be then?" she taunted.

His eyes narrowed and he reached for her but Hermione was quicker. "You wouldn't do that," he spat.

"Don't be so sure," she said with a smirk. "I may find it in my heart to take him back and then we'll be happy for the rest of our lives. He'll make love to me every night and I'll marry him again. I'll give him maybe one or two more kids and we'll be completely in love."

"You little bitch! If you take him back, so help me Merlin, I will kill you!" he screamed at her. "Do you hear me? I. Will. Kill. You."

"Oh, I hear you, and by the way," Hermione said with an evil smile. "So do they," she said, pointing towards the door where there were two Aurors. "I guess you can add death threats to the report," she said as she began to walk away. "I hope you rot in hell, McLaggen," she said before she walked out the door. Once she was outside, her smug façade faded away and she walked towards the floo network.

Harry and Ron were still taking care of her paperwork and she still had Daphne to confront, but she couldn't take anymore of them today. She wanted to spend more time with her sons and she would leave her confrontation with Greengrass for later. As she made it to the floo, she was nearly bowled over by Ginny, who was hugging her to the point where she couldn't breathe.

"Ginny... need to... breathe," Hermione said.

Ginny pulled back with a sheepish look on her face and hugged her again, a lot less tightly. "I knew that you had to be in trouble, and when Ron and Harry told me about what they had found in your flat, I was convinced that something had happened to you too. I'm so glad that you're okay!" the red-head said with tears in her eyes.

"Thanks Gin. But I'm on my way home. If you come with me I can tell you everything that happened," Hermione said wearily.

"Are you okay?" Ginny asked worriedly.

The brunette shook her head. "I'm not, but I can't break down here. I did enough crying yesterday night when the twins were finally asleep, but I need a friend to talk to," she said quietly.

"Okay, let's go then," said Ginny as they walked to get some green powder.

On their way, Hermione bumped into a man and looked up to apologize, only to see the source of the grey eyes her sons had inherited. She swallowed hard and turned away, not missing the broken look in Draco's eyes as she turned away from him without a word. Why couldn't life had been on their side for once? She asked herself as she turned to look at him one more time.

Draco was still standing there, looking handsome and sad, but he made no move to speak to her and though it hurt like hell, Hermione knew that it was for the best. They would both move on, raise their sons, and find happiness elsewhere. They were just never meant to be together. She didn't make it home before more tears came, but at least she had her friends to lean on when she needed them the most. And a deep part of her hoped that Draco had someone to lean on as well.

I know, I know, it's sad and depressing and I almost burnt the chicken I was cooking to finish this chapter and get it out. It's by far the shortest of the entire story, or at least I think it is. Anyway, I hope I don't upset anyone with the happenings in this chapter, though I got a few anti-Hermione reviews last chapter. But you can see here that they both ended mutually and it hurt them both. No one came on top of no one in this chapter. I changed it from what I originally wanted because of a reviewer, and because I wanted. I like how this turned out because otherwise Hermione would've been on her high horse again and never would've forgiven Draco.

Almost everyone guessed correctly as to who rescued her, so cookies for all of you. There are

only two chapters left I think, so we're closing in on the end. Also, I wish I would've thought of elisita94's idea of Hermione being in Romania and Charlie being the one who found her, but I had started writing this chapter already and I didn't want to go back to change it, but it was a pretty good idea. Again, thank you so much for all the positive reviews and for the urging and I'm sorry I took so long to update! I hope the next doesn't take so long!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 21: Time

We built it up, to watch it fall

Like we meant nothing at all

I gave and gave the best of me

But couldn't give you what you need

You walked away, you stole my life

Just to find what you're looking for

But no matter how I try

I can't hate you anymore

Harry and Ron watched Hermione as she stood silently, waiting outside of the holding rooms of the Ministry where Daphne Greengrass was located. She hadn't been charged officially, but today would be the day, if Hermione had anything to say about it. McLaggen was already in the process for a trial, Greengrass wouldn't be too far behind.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Ron asked her, noting how cool and cold Hermione looked.

She looked up at him with a blank face and nodded. "I have to do this. She thinks she's so smug because she's this blonde bombshell that can use her looks to get out of anything she wants. Well, someone needs to bring her down a peg or two, and that someone is going to be me," Hermione said.

Harry sighed. "Are you sure you won't lose your cool in there and hurt her physically? You can do more damage than good if you do."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "I just want her to know that though she drove Draco and I apart permanently, she won't live to see daylight again," she said before some Aurors left the room and then motioned for her to enter.

Daphne looked roughed up and her usually impeccable hair and clothes were in disarray. Hermione wanted to laugh, but her heart was clenched too painfully for that. This was the woman who had made it impossible for Hermione to give her sons a real family. It wasn't all her fault, and the ex-Gryffindor took responsibility for her part of the blame, but not all of it was on her shoulders.

"How is the Ministry treating you? Would you like a glass of wine? Some clean clothes? A toothbrush so that you can wash your mouth the muggle way?" Hermione asked her smartly. The sneer on the blonde's oddly enough made something inside her want to laugh, but the brunette refrained.

Daphne flipped her hair, but it didn't have the same effect as it usually did. Not when hairs were sticking out in random places and when she was located in a dark holding room. "Forget all that and just send Draco over to me, he'll make it all better," she purred.

"Do you really think he wants to see you now that he knows that you were McLaggen's accomplice in my kidnapping?" asked Hermione darkly.

"You have no proof that I helped him willingly. As a-matter-of-fact I don't remember any of the things I did. I think Cormac used an Unforgivable on me to make me help him," Daphne said with a pout, her eyes watering for effect.

Hermione smirked at her. "Did you forget that there's something called Veritaserum? You have to drink water or something sometime soon. When you do, you'll be interrogated."

"That's illegal!" Daphne hissed.

"Not when the Ministry gives their okay," Hermione said smugly. "And Harry is getting that done at the moment. You won't get out of this unscathed, Daphne. You and McLaggen are going to pay dearly for the months I missed with my sons. You don't know what I'm truly capable of to defend my sons and myself," she growled out softly.

Daphne glared at her and scoffed. "I'll get out. My mother knows most of the members in the Wizengamot and they will never allow me to stop into a prison cell," she said with a smirk.

Hermione just scoffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "Do you really believe all that rot? Well, I'll tell you what I told McLaggen, if the power I have in the wizarding world is not enough, Harry's will make sure that you spend the rest of your days in a prison cell. Either way, you won't get out of this without punishment, so enjoy what little of the sun you can see from the window in this room because it will be the last you will see," she said before turning and walking towards the door.

"Did you know of the nights Draco and I spent together? He would forget you in my arms and he was quite good at it. Even if you do forgive him and get back together, every time you're both together, you'll have to wonder if he's thinking of me instead of you. Good luck with that Hermione," Daphne said with glee.

Hermione just shook her head and decided not to hold onto the other woman's parting words. There was nothing more that she and McLaggen could destroy. It was finally over and the day those two were put into prison would be the day Hermione would breathe freely. At the moment, all Hermione could think about was getting back to her sons and being alone so that she could

cry a little bit more.

After a few weeks of getting her life back to rights, Hermione felt a bit more at ease, though her heart still ached when she saw her sons and realized that she had missed months of their lives. She spent her mornings at the medical center and then went home in the afternoons to spend the rest of the day with her twins.

At the moment, she and Neville were inspecting a new illegal breed of animal that looked much like a guinea pig but threw out needles like a porcupine. They were making notes on it and wondering if it was a cross between the two creatures when Hermione backed into a tray and startled the animal. It released its needles in a long spray that hit her leg and Neville's arm with deadly accuracy. Hermione managed to reach for her wand and immobilized the creature as a few assistance medi-witches raced over to help and the animal healers took the creature back to its holding pen.

"We need to get you to a room so that we can see the damage," a medi-witch said as she and three others levitated Hermione and Neville to a room separated by a curtain.

"We knew the downs of this job, Nev," said Hermione with a pain-filled smile.

He looked slightly pale at the sight of blood, but he was holding it together. "Yeah, I know what you mean, but you seemed to have gotten the worst part," he said, eyeing the needles embedded in Hermione's jean clad leg. He looked at his arm and let out a sigh. "I barely got scratched but it still hurts," he admitted.

The medi-witches went to work on them both and Neville was right, he had only taken a few scratches, so he cured pretty fast compared to Hermione. They were getting her a potion that would work as a sort of rabies shot to the muggles, since they didn't know what the needles from the creature contained. Neville grimaced as he saw Hermione's leg, which was bare and had a balm all over the affected area.

"Stop looking at my bare leg, Neville Longbottom," Hermione said in a scolding voice. She burst out laughing when his face turned red and he sputtered nervously.

"I wasn't looking at it like that, Hermione! I swear!" he said nervously.

She stopped laughing and nodded. "Don't worry, Nev, I was just joking with you. If I were you, I would've been staring at the wound too. Don't worry about me, I'm fine," she said.

Neville smiled shyly and moved towards the door. "I'm going to call someone to let them know about this. You shouldn't be alone after an accident like this," he said before he walked out and didn't give Hermione the chance to tell him not to.

She sat there for a long moment, watching as the balm slowly healed the tiny, still bleeding wounds and was thankful that the creature's needles hadn't been poisonous or filled with any other type of side effect. Why did people insist on trying to play god with poor innocent animals? A medi-witch walked into the room and inspected the wounds before spreading another soothing balm for the ache and then wrapping her leg in gauze and then leaving Hermione alone to redress and repair her jeans.

There was a knock on the door and Hermione called to let the person in without looking, keeping her eyes on repairing the holes of her jeans and trying to remove the blood stains to no avail. When she looked up, her eyes met grey and she nearly jumped. Behind Draco was Neville and he looked slightly nervous. "I tried contacting Harry or Ron, but neither answered."

Hermione let out heavy sigh and nodded before thanking her friend and watching him leave. She looked at Draco and said nothing, trying to determine if she would be able to walk on her own because of the ache in her leg. Draco for his part was feeling the annoyance build as she tried to ignore him. "You know, if you want me to leave, I will," he said to her as she tried testing out her leg.

"No," said Hermione. "That's okay. I'm not going to push you even further away after you took the time to come down here. We may not be a couple anymore, but we can be friends... right?" she asked, finally looking at him.

Draco just nodded and offered her a half-smile. "How are the boys?" he asked, moving forward slightly when she placed weight on her leg and grimaced.

Hermione managed a smile through the pain. "They're doing great. They mention you everyday," she said, trying to swallow down the grimace and pain so that Draco would be convinced that she was fine. But she took a wrong step and would've fallen had he not been within touching distance of her.

Draco caught her in his arms and frowned when he heard her swallow down a small noise of pain. She had always been too brave for her own good. Hermione looked up at him and felt her heart skip a beat when their eyes met. She had forced her brain to forget how handsome he was and how his eyes were the same as her sons. They were over, and there was no use in dwelling in something that would never work out. But her brain never really did what she wanted, even though it had the capability of resolving almost any conflict. Her heart betrayed her in that moment as well, for they didn't force her to move back when his lips neared hers.

A thousand memories raced through her head of Draco's smiles, his kisses, his caresses. His scent was like a long forgotten memory that was suddenly close and she wanted to cling to for as long as she could, but she knew that she couldn't. They couldn't do this, not matter how good it felt to have his hands digging into her hips, or the fact that her leg no longer hurt. She was the first to pull back and look away.

"Let me go, Draco," she said in an oddly choked voice.

He did, but reluctantly. He knew that she still loved him, despite what she said and did at the moment, but he didn't want to make their relationship even more strained than it was. He moved his fingers to brush against her flushed cheek and watched as her eyes watered. He pulled back and made for the door without another word.

"Don't rush it, Draco. I know I said that we're not meant to be together, but maybe some day we'll be able to fix our relationship. That time isn't right now," she said as he reached for the doorknob.

Draco turned to look at her and gave her a nod. "I'll wait for that day, Hermione. Whether it's months from now, or maybe even years. I'll wait and if that time never comes, know that I won't ever take anyone else into my life," he said before walking out of the room and leaving her

alone with her tears of physical and emotional pain.

She wanted that day to come too, when she would be able to tell Draco that she forgave him and that all those words she had said about them not belonging together had been complete rot. She just hoped that it was soon and despite what Draco said about not taking anyone else she hoped she didn't lose him for sure.

Hermione had never felt as light as she did when McLaggen and Greengrass were sentenced to life in prison for her kidnapping, physical assault, and illegal use of a love potion. It happened the same month that the twins turned one, and Draco had insisted on celebrating at the party. They had planned together on who to invite, what the theme would be, and where it would be. That was how she found herself in Malfoy Manor.

Though she had been hesitant to bring her friends and family to the Malfoy's home, Narcissa had assured her that her husband would behave himself because the party was for his grandsons. With the help of a professional party planner, Ginny, Lavender, and Narcissa, Hermione and Draco had accomplished the perfect party for the children. Old schoolmates who had children the age of the twins had been invited and even people who didn't have children but were dear to either Hermione or Draco.

The grand gardens in the backyard had been decorated in streamers, balloons, stuffed animals, and real animals. Hermione was standing with her two best friends as they watched over the twins and little Roan. Darius and Darien were now walking, though still a bit wobbly, but they were getting around on their own. There was a table filled with gifts for them, and another table, almost the length of a house table at Hogwarts, was filled with food and cakes of various flavors and sizes.

"Oops!" Hermione exclaimed as Darien fell on his bum after his brother accidentally pushed him. "Watch out now, sweetheart," she said as Darius walked off to be picked up by Lucius. Hermione watched with a hidden smile as the older man couldn't contain his pride at the child in his arms.

"Oi, Mione, these finger foods are great," Ron said after swallowing and taking a gulp from his butterbeer.

Both Harry and Hermione shared a small disgusted look. "Yes, well you can thank Draco for that. The house elves were the ones who cooked everything—against my wishes, might I add," Hermione replied before kissing the tot in her arms loudly. The boy giggled and hugged her tightly as Harry reached over to tickle him.

"Where are the birthday boys?" asked Ginny as she walked out of the Manor and straight for Hermione.

"One is right here and the other one is with his grandfather. It's great to see you!" Hermione said, giving the red-head a one-arm hug. "How are things?" she asked with meaning.

Ginny smiled happily; she was almost glowing. "A bit rocky in the mornings, but otherwise fine. Blaise has been very supportive," she said as they both turned to look at the subject of their conversation. He was standing next to Draco, who was holding Darius in his arms now.

"Have you guys talked about marriage?" Hermione asked as she pulled Ginny off at a distance.

She shook her head. "We're fine the way we are, Hermione. You, my mother, and I have different ideas on what marriage is. I'm not ready, and neither is Blaise, and we really don't care about what other people will think when they find out," she said before winking and walking off to find her mother.

Hermione walked back to her two best friends and smiled to herself as she set her son down so that he could walk off. Ron was frowning as he watched Draco and Blaise. "Did she tell you?" he asked Hermione.

"Tell me what?" she asked.

"That he's gone and gotten her pregnant and refuses to marry her," Ron said darkly.

Harry's eyes were wide. "Ginny's pregnant?"

Hermione nodded and smirked at them. "She doesn't want to marry him either, Ron. They're both in a mutual place and they'll do whatever feels right. You can't just push them into something that they don't want."

"Mum and dad will flip out. Dad will murder Zabini and then Gin's kid will be fatherless. Haven't they even thought about what the rest of the family will say?" Ron asked her and Harry.

"Come on, Ron. I think you're overreacting," said Harry as he winked at Pansy, who was talking to Lucius and Narcissa. "If she's happy, then you should all let her be."

Hermione nodded in agreement, but Ron just shot them a glare and walked off to sit next to his wife and son. "It's great to see that you're all happy with your person. You and Pansy; Ginny and Blaise; Ron and Lavender. I'm happy for all of you."

"But you're not happy yourself," said Harry quietly.

Hermione shrugged. "I have my sons and that's enough. I don't need anything else," she said, and against herself, her eyes strayed towards Draco, who was chuckling at something Blaise was saying to him.

Harry followed her line of vision and cleared his throat. "Right. Forgive me if I don't believe you," he said with a faint smirk. "Mione, I love you. You're my family just as much as Ron and Pansy, but you deserve to be happy too. No matter what you say, you're not," he said to her.

"I can't just forget all that we've done to each other," she said, eyes still on Draco, who was holding both babies in his arms now. "Everything is too recent and I don't trust myself to put everything I have into a relationship with him just yet," she admitted.

Harry nodded in understanding. "But you can't live your life in fear. Your twins will grow up and they will want to know why you aren't with their father. What will you tell them? That you couldn't forgive him or let go of your fear in order to be with him? What kind of life lesson is that for them?"

Hermione grinned. "Since when did you get so smart, Mr. Potter?"

"Since Pansy came into my life and made me want to be a better man. I asked her to marry me and she said yes. We won't get married right away; we're also enjoying our relationship right now without the marriage vows, but some day we will have the ceremony that will bind us together for the rest of our lives. I love her, and she loves me," Harry said, not able to contain his happiness.

"I'm happy for you," Hermione said honestly. "But I need more time to fix my own life, Harry. This isn't something I can rush or wish to rush either. Maybe someday soon I'll be able to look Draco in the eye and tell him that I forgive him and that I hope he forgives me. But the time is not now," she said before she gave him a brief hug and walked over to Draco, who was motioning her over in order to start the party.

Harry released an unhappy sigh but his face brightened when Pansy walked over to wrap her arms around his waist. "Why were you frowning just now?" she asked him quietly.

He sighed again. "Hermione is unhappy without Malfoy. Dunno why, when clearly the guy is a big git, but I think she misses him. She just won't admit defeat. She says it isn't time yet."

Pansy nodded. "I can understand that, sweetheart, and you should too. Hermione needs time to heal all the pain and when she does, she'll be able to accept Draco again. Let's just hope that we don't reach the twins eighteenth birthday's before that happens," she said before pulling him along when people took their seats for lunch.

"They're both really tired," Hermione said as she watched Darius and Darien sleeping soundly in their cribs at the Manor. She had agreed when Draco had suggested that they stay the night. She really wouldn't be able to deal with two fussy one-year-olds on her own. It had happened before, and her entire night had been hell.

The party had been a great success with the twins and the other children. There had been a fair share of scraped knees and a few fights for the same toy, but the children that had been invited had had a lot of fun. She and Draco had held a twin while the guests sang them the birthday song, and with their parents help, the candles had been blown out. Hermione had made her own wish, something she knew that her sons would wish for had they been any older, and she wondered if Draco had done the same. She had wished for her hard headedness to go away and allow her to be happy. She wanted to be happy more than anything.

Draco ran a hand through Darien's soft, blond hair and smiled slightly before doing the same to Darius. Their features had been changing slightly, and though at the beginning they had resembled him more, now Draco found the similarities to Hermione uncanny. Or maybe it was just the fact that he missed her and the boys more than anything now that they were living on their own. He looked to Hermione, who was sitting at the window seat and he walked over to join her.

"How have you been?" he asked her quietly.

"As good as I can get, which means not so good when you're living alone with two toddlers" she replied with a half-smile. "What about you?"

"The same," he replied. "I miss the three of you, and there's no point in denying it. My life was

so much brighter when I had you nagging me to death every day about the house elves, and when the boys woke me up in the middle of the night."

Hermione looked at him for a few seconds before looking away. "I know what you mean. But it's still not time for us, Draco. I miss you too, but..."

"We can't rush into things again," he stated.

She nodded and stood. "Time, Draco. All we both need is time," she said before walking towards the door.

"Hermione?" he asked, stopping her before she was out of the nursery.

"Yes?" she asked, turning to look at him and finding him standing very close to her.

Draco leaned forward and pressed a kiss to her cheek. "Have a good night," he said before he walked out and left her alone.

Hermione touched the spot where his lips had touched and smiled to herself. She would have a good night and she hoped he did too. She checked on her boys one last time before dimming the lights and walking towards her old room to get some rest. She had a lot of thinking ahead of her.

Two Years Later...

"Why do we have to wear these suits? We look like penguins!" a whiny voice said.

Hermione rolled her eyes and made a mental note to not let her son spend so much time with Ron and Roan, since those two were the whiniest people she knew. She turned to Darius and smiled. "Sweetie, it's only for one day and because aunt Pansy asked you to wear a suit. Besides, your daddy is going to wear one too, and so will Darien and Roan," she said as she watched her other son sitting in a chair quietly, swinging his legs back and forth and watching the rush.

"Why don't you two run along and find your father and your uncles? I think I saw Ron and Blaise around here somewhere," she said, poking her head out of the white tent they had been using to dress into their wedding attire. "Ah, there they are!" she exclaimed, pulling the boys along towards Blaise, who was standing with Ron and watching over a five year old and a one year old little girl with curly, red hair. "Would you two mind watching over Darien and Darius? I'm not finished getting ready, and I'm already late in helping Pansy."

"Sure," said Ron, high-fiving his nephews. "You look great, Mione," he said, wagging his eyebrows and making her blush.

"You're a married man, Ronald Weasley, don't give me that look," she said with a grin before she ran off to give herself the finishing touches. She was in an elegant, lavender colored gown that trailed behind her beautifully. Her hair was in tightly packed curls on top of her head and was held up with many lavender little flower pins. She had been a bit worried that the pins wouldn't hold her heavy hair, but the stylist had accomplished it with minimum fuss.

Once she was satisfied with the way she looked, she picked up the slight train of her dress and her high heels, and ran off to the main tent to help Pansy. After all, the wedding would be in half an hour, and the bride to be had a right to be fashionably late, but not too late. Pansy's hair and make-up was done, but she wasn't in her dress yet. She looked composed but a little shifty.

"You're not going to run off on my best friend, are you?" she asked Pansy with a smile.

The dark haired woman shook her head and grinned. "No, I'm not. But we've waited so long for this and I was so sure that I wouldn't get nervous. But guess what? I'm feeling those butterflies in my stomach now," Pansy said as she stared at herself in the mirror.

"Just remember that you love him and he loves you. Nothing else will matter after that," Hermione put in as Millicent walked into the tent with various bouquets for the flower girls and the main one for the bride-to-be.

Pansy smiled and nodded, walking over to look at her wedding dress. Hermione watched her and felt her heart ache when she remembered her wedding day. She had been completely miserable the day she had been forced to marry Draco Malfoy in a lavish ceremony that she had had no voice in. Though the dress and everything else had been beautiful, it had felt like the worse day of her life. Now though, she would be willingly walking down the isle with him, even if they were only the witnesses who would sign for the couple. She hadn't seen him in about an hour, so she didn't know what he looked like in his wedding attire either.

The past two years had been peaceful and calm. She and Draco had shared joint custody of the twins and they had been on friendly terms. They kept the boys every other week and sometimes even went to have lunch or dinner together. True to his word, Draco had given her the space she needed, and he hadn't pushed for them to have anything more than friendship. The children were beginning to ask questions about why they weren't living together like Roan, Darlene, and Danielle Zabini's parents were, and Hermione had had to answer them truthfully. She had told them that she and Draco were only friends now and that even though they weren't together, they loved them very much. Hermione came back to herself in time to see Pansy already in her beautiful wedding gown.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said with a grin.

Hermione smiled and handed over Pansy's bouquet as Millicent gave her dress the last touches. "You're marrying one of my brother's," she said quietly. "And I know that I don't need to threaten you to make him happy, because I've seen the look on his face since he became involved with you. Just don't hurt him, Pansy, he's been through so much already," she said, eyes tearing up.

Pansy nodded and her own eyes were glassy. "Thanks for being a great friend after all we did to you in school. Believe me when I say that I wish you and Draco the best. I know you two will end up together sometime soon. He's been celibate for the past two years, and that's saying something. Forgive him, Hermione. There's a great man under all of that ego," she said before hugging the ex-Gryffindor.

She nodded. "I know, Pansy, believe me. We should go before we're too late," Hermione said as she helped pick up the back of Pansy's dress as they exited the tent just as the sun was setting.

They walked towards another magical tent that was only slightly larger than the rest on the outside, but was a grand room for the ceremony inside. Hermione's eyes met grey as they entered the section before the main ceremony hall where all the flower girls and the men were. She smiled slightly when she saw that he was standing with the twins and they were wearing similar suits with a lavender colored vest. There was a whole team going on of white, lavender, and black.

"Okay, the children go first," said Pansy ushering Darlene up to the front so that she could throw flower petals out, followed by Darius and Darien as the ring bearers—one ring each. Then were the couples. Hermione took Draco's offered arm and smiled, feeling slightly nervous herself. They were followed by Harry and Molly Weasley, Millicent and Greg Goyle, Ron and Lavender, and Blaise and Ginny. Roan would help carry Pansy's train with a little girl that was the daughter of one of Pansy's cousins, but they would be at the back. Surprisingly, Lucius Malfoy was going to be the one to give Pansy away.

A beautiful, more classical version of the wedding march started and the ceremony began. Hermione and Draco watched their sons proudly as the boys walked down the aisle behind Darlene. All the guests were on their feet and watching them as they walked through. She felt a small flutter in her heart when Draco's eyes met hers for a moment, but she smiled and looked away, keeping her attention on the aisle ahead of them. Everything had turned out beautifully, and how could it not? This was the wedding of the century, or the next best wedding of the century since Hermione Granger had married Draco Malfoy. The boy who lived was marrying an ex-Slytherin, only the closest people had been invited to the wedding, though Pansy knew far more people than Harry did.

As they all took their places at the front of the room, they all turned to watch Pansy glide down the aisle, Harry's eyes transfixed on the woman he loved. Hermione turned to look at Draco again and they shared a look that made him smirk. She then checked on the children, who were at the care of Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy.

The ceremony was thankfully not too long and not too short either, but meaningful. Hermione could see the tears in Pansy's and Molly's eyes, since Harry had been like another son to her, and Hermione herself had been sniffing by the end of the ceremony. After the rings were given to the bride and groom, and the kiss was over, everyone poured in to congratulate the pair in their union.

"Okay, we need to go outside for the pictures," Pansy said, her hand in Harry's as she directed the people towards the exit. After posing time after time, the children began to get restless and Pansy knew that they wouldn't cooperate for much longer if she kept pushing it. "Just one more shot, guys!" she said to all the little ones. "I want you all to go with your parents for a family picture, okay?"

Hermione took Darien in her arms as Draco picked up Darius and they were instructed to sit on a stone bench close together and the perfect image of a family. The boys hugged their parents tightly and a few shots were taken of them that way. Almost immediately after pictures were taken the chairs were grouped together in tens and tables with fancy silverware and centerpieces were conjured up for dinner to begin.

"Eat with your mouth closed, honey," Hermione chided Darien when the delicious food was served.

Draco snickered to himself and was happy to see that they were sitting together as a family. He couldn't even begin to describe how his life had been the past two years. Though he and Hermione had remained as friends and got along better than they had in a long time, he still missed them. There was nothing he wouldn't give to have the three of them with him again. At least he could brag about calling Hermione his friend now, but he wanted more. So much more.

After dinner, and enough cake to give the children stomach aches, Draco took the moment to go drop them and Darlene off at the Manor. Hermione sat alone near the dance floor, smiling and watching the couples try to dance. Ron was doing a particularly bad job and Hermione felt sorry for Lavender's toes. The photographer walked by and handed her a moving photo of her, the twins, and Draco together. It was a very beautiful image and it made her eyes water in feeling. She needed to do something to make that beautiful family happen for her sons. They deserved it.

She stood and walked out of the tent for some fresh air. She needed to gather her courage for what she was thinking of doing, because if Draco said it was too late, her heart would be forever broken. As she walked through the garden, she pulled off her shoes and felt the fresh grass under her feet. The scents were almost overpowering, but wonderful all the same. As she came to a gazebo that was made of solid stone, she spotted a head of short white-blond hair and slowly approached. His tie was undone and the first few buttons of his shirt were undone, but he was gazing at the same image she had received a few minutes before of their family.

"Did they go to bed willingly?" she asked Draco.

He nodded and sighed. "They just made me promise to take them to the zoo the day after tomorrow," he said in amusement.

"You shouldn't give them all they ask of you. You'll spoil them," Hermione said as she moved to stand next to him.

"They're my sons, Hermione. I want to give them all that I can," Draco replied as they gazed at the darkness of the plants surrounding them. "Besides, I don't want them to be unhappy because you and I are separated."

"I remember that when I was a child, I always wanted a big family. Our sons ask me why you and I aren't together, and lately, I've been asking myself the same thing," she admitted. "I know it's my fault an all, but... but is it too late to fix?"

Draco turned to look at her, surprise shining through his eyes. "I thought you said it was too soon."

"I said that more than two years ago. Unless... you don't want to anymore," she said, her gaze straying from his. "That's okay if you don't. I understand." She really didn't, but she wasn't about to tell him that and break into tears.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, cupping her cheek in his hand. "For always hurting you and doubting you. I've been a very stupid man because I've made you miserable for so much of your life."

Hermione laid her hand on top of his and smiled genuinely. "I wasn't completely miserable because you gave me my sons. I love them more than I ever thought possible and I love them even more because they're half of you."

Draco shook his head once. "But I've always hurt you, why would you—"

She silenced him with a kiss. Here she was, telling him that she wanted to be with him again and he kept on being negative. The kiss was the most amazing thing she had felt in the long time. His taste was bringing back so many memories, reminding her how much she had really missed him. Her heart had had time to heal and now it was strong and sure again. She wanted to give her relationship to Draco another try. McLaggen and Greengrass would never interfere again and everyone kept insisting that she and Draco were meant to be together. Their sons were daily reminders that something special had always been between them, even when they had hated each other's guts.

"Will you shut up and admit that you love me?" she asked Draco breathlessly.

"Now why would I do something like that?" he asked her haughtily. Her eyes narrowed and he chuckled before kissing her again. They pulled apart when various fairy lights began to light up all around them, creating an amazingly romantic scene. He looked into Hermione's sweet brown eyes and sighed. "Are you absolutely sure of this?" he murmured.

Hermione nodded. "If I wasn't, I never would've come over to talk to you. My heart is beating strong again Draco," she said, eyes wide and watery. "Don't break it again."

"I won't ever take you for granted again," Draco said before their lips met once more. He pulled away and gave her a slightly uneasy look. "You do know that you have to marry me again, right?"

Hermione nodded and smirked. "But we're doing things my way this time."

Draco snorted and hugged her to him tightly. "That wasn't it. Have you forgotten that clause in the pre-nup?"

The brunette paled slightly and then laughed. "You mean that we have to have another kid before two years are over? That's fine by me, as long as your father doesn't interfere and ends up giving up quintuplets or something more frightening," she said, still laughing.

Draco took in her sweet scent and relished the feel of her in his arms. "Kiss me, Granger," he said quietly.

As she did, they pulled apart when they heard the sound of whistling and cat calls. They both turned to see the eavesdroppers, and Hermione wished she had brought her wand along to curse her two best friends. "It's about damn time!" Ron yelled, his arm around his wife. Standing next to them were Harry and Pansy, and a distance away, Lucius and Narcissa.

Hermione turned her face against Draco's shoulder in embarrassment and laughed softly. Draco just rolled his eyes and hugged her again. He had never been so happy that he had been patient enough to wait for Hermione. He had his family back and he would cherish them more than his own life.

No, that's not the end. But the next chapter will be! Unless... do you guys want me to leave it here in use your imaginations for their future, or do you want me to write it out? I've already got the outline, but either way we get our happy ending, as promised. I just hope everyone enjoyed this chapter and that it wasn't too mushy. Draco was maybe OOC, but he's been pining for Hermione all this time, he's bound to be a bit emotional, right?

I'm a bit confused, and if anyone knows about weddings, can you answer me this? Are the maid of honor and best man the same thing as the witnesses, or are they two separate roles? Anyone who can answer that gets many, many cookies in thanks. Again, thanks for reading this fic and if you do review, thanks a bunch! Have a great weekend!

Byebye

!Joey!

Chapter 22: No More Hate

And now, the conclusion!

No More Hate

But no matter how I try

I can't hate you anymore

"And they lived happily ever after," said a bored voice.

"That story was boring," muttered Darius.

"Well, it got your brother to sleep," said his father, pointing to Darien, who was sound asleep in his own bed. Draco smirked as his son pouted. Hermione had invited him over for dinner, and the boys had asked him to read them a bedtime story. He had picked the story of a brave knight, fighting to save a princess, but Darius hadn't liked it much. "It's time for you to get some sleep too."

"But I'm not sleepy," said the brunet child before he rubbed his eyes and yawned widely.

"But I am, and so is your mother. Now be a nice boy and close your eyes," said Draco, pulling up the boy's sheets towards his chin. He stood and faded the lamp light to near darkness, but enough for either of the twins to see in case they needed to use the restroom. He walked out of the room and towards the kitchen, where Hermione was putting away the clean dishes the muggle way.

"Are they asleep?" she asked, not stopping what she was doing.

"Darien, yes. Darius, almost. I don't think he liked the story I read to them, but he was almost nodding off either way. So... how have you been?" asked Draco as he stood next to her and

watched her work.

"Fine. Just a little bit tired with the twins running all over the place and making a mess. You know me, I rather do things the muggle way most of the time," she said with a small smile.

"Have you started the plan for our wedding?" he asked with a smirk, leaning towards her to press a kiss to her cheek.

Hermione smiled and turned to him, making their lips meet in a chaste peck. "I have many ideas, but I can't seem to decide on where the ceremony should be."

Draco thought about it for a moment as his eyes swept over her sweet face, the light freckles over her nose, and the healthy rosy color to her cheeks. "Why don't we marry where our sons were conceived?" he asked seriously.

"In Venice?" Hermione asked, lips curling into a smile. She thought it over for a moment and then nodded. "That sounds wonderful. Of course, contrary to our first wedding, I want this to be friends and family only. Is that okay with you?"

"That's fine with me," replied Draco, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her into his body. He had missed holding her. She had always fit perfectly against him, and he had yearned for her warmth for many, many nights. "Have you found a date yet?"

Hermione nodded. "Do you think a month from now will do?"

Draco sighed and shook his head. "Personally I think it's too much time for us to wait, but I won't take away the chance for you to plan the wedding however you'd like. After all, when we married the first time, I remember you refused to participate."

"I barely even wanted to get into the dress on the wedding day," Hermione admitted. "But that was so long ago, and so much has happened. Draco... I'm still afraid that we may be rushing into things," she said, looking into his gray eyes.

"It's been a little more than six years since we married the first time. How can you say that we're rushing things? I understand your hesitation, but all this time has shown me that I need you and our sons in my life. I want to be the best man I can be for the three of you," said Draco before leaning forward to kiss her, nice and sweet.

Hermione smiled and nodded. "Will you participate in the preparations with me?"

"If it doesn't involve picking what flowers go with what and if the dress makes you look fat, I'll help you with anything that I can," he said with a chuckle.

"Deal," Hermione said brightly. "Now come on, I want you to pick out your suit," she said, pulling him along to her bedroom.

Draco held in an annoyed sigh and just followed her. Merlin, the things he did for this woman.

The following month was filled with preparations for Draco and Hermione's second wedding. The press had gone crazy at the news, but no one was talking about when or where it would be.

There was a great cloud of mystery surrounding the ceremony, and the magazines and papers were willing to pay any amount to get at least a small piece of information on the upcoming wedding.

No one except the bride-to-be, the groom-to-be, friends, and family knew where the wedding would take place. Draco had managed to get a hold of one of the ancient villas in Venice and they would hold the ceremony and dinner there. What Hermione didn't know was that he had bought it for her and would give it to her officially on the day of their wedding. He had been thinking that maybe they needed a change of air for a few months, and he hoped that Hermione accepted his wish of staying in Venice for an indeterminate amount of time. It wouldn't be permanent, but he knew it would do the twins some good to be in a different country for some time.

He watched Hermione and the boys as they stopped and stared into the windows of every other shop in the central district. He had never had the patience to window-shop, but he saw now that Hermione and the twins had more than enough. He rolled his eyes when they passed a bookshop and his dear fiancée's eyes lit up as if it were Christmas.

"Mommy!" Whined both boys in perfect unison when she reached for the door.

Hermione rolled her eyes and shot all three a death glare, including Draco because he was giving her a smug look. "I just want to take a peek," she said to them.

"That peek will turn into hours and hours. We want to take a look around at other things," said Draco as he took her hand and pulled her along.

"Well, what did you have in mind?" she asked as she took Darien's hand in her free one.

"Can we go on one of those boats?" asked Darius.

"That's called a Gondola, sweetheart," Hermione said, correcting him almost automatically. She turned to Draco and smiled, remembering the ride they had enjoyed a few years ago, before things had really gone down the drain.

He returned her smile and nodded. "Let's go then, but you both need to sit still unless you want us all to fall into the water," said Draco to his sons.

As they boarded the Gondola, Hermione couldn't help but wonder if they wouldn't throw off the vessel's balance by sitting all together on one side. She was holding Darien in her arms, while Draco was holding Darius, and all together, they were enjoying the sunset.

"Look at that," said Draco with a grin.

Hermione looked up and smiled. They were coming up on the Bridge of Sighs, and the sun was setting. She had her true love with her, but in addition to him, she had the two most important beings in her life there as well. "Who wants to give mommy a kiss as we go under the bridge?" she asked her boys.

The twins moved into her arms and kissed her, not allowing Draco the chance to do so as well, the way the legend said. "Hey, what about me!" he asked as they kept traveling under the Bridge of Sighs. The boys jumped into his arms and kissed him too. Well, that hadn't been

exactly what he had meant, but he supposed that it was okay. After all, what love was truer than a child and a parent's love?

"See, now we'll all be together forever," said Hermione as Draco wrapped an arm around her and pulled her close. "Besides, we had our true love kiss under the bridge the last time we were here," she said as they left the Bridge of Sighs behind.

Draco just held her and his sons as best he could and smiled to himself. Though they had been separated for such a long time, they were back together again. He just hoped that the legend stayed true. He never wanted to be apart from his family ever again and he would give all that he could to make them happy. Besides, tomorrow they would be married again, and his life would be complete.

Hermione stared at the view from the bedroom she had been using to get ready for the wedding. She couldn't believe that the day had finally come. The past month had flown by with preparations for the wedding, and with Ginny, Pansy, and Narcissa's help, they had managed to get everything ready. Narcissa had taken the reigns of the preparations that day in order to give Hermione the time she needed to get ready. The only reason why Hermione was not flipping out was because she knew that Narcissa would keep everything in control and would know what to do if something went wrong.

The villa that Draco had managed to borrow was beautiful. It was a panoramic vision of trees, meadows and woods, and a distance away was the cannal. The grass was , and a distance away was the cannal. The grass was so green and fresh, and the sky was so blue. The day was absolutely perfect for the wedding. She was in her dress, a beige gown of smooth satin with a halter top and a low-cut back. The material of the dress glittered slightly and it fit her body almost like a second skin before flaring out and back from the knees down. Her hair had grown long and covered much of her back in bouncy curls, and on one side her hair was held up by a beautiful pin shaped like a dragonfly.

Ginny was sitting on the bed, playing with her little daughter, while Pansy had just left the room to make sure that the men were ready. "Come on sweetheart, let's go get your auntie Hermione so that she can finally get married," she said to the little girl. "Hermione? I think we should get you into your shoes so that we can go. We only have five more minutes," said Ginny.

Hermione turned to her and nodded. "I never thought I would see this day again. My second marriage to the same man," she said with a small laugh.

The red-head grinned. "I was beginning to wonder if you two would ever get your acts together," she said. "But it's good to see that you did. You look beautiful," said Ginny, hugging her with one arm.

"Thank you," Hermione said with a blush. "How about you? When are you going to finally accept to be Mrs. Zabini?"

Ginny seemed to glow for a moment in complete happiness. "I already did!" she said with a girlish squeal, which Hermione echoed. "I didn't want to tell you until after the wedding, since this is your day, but I accepted. Look," she said, showing off the beautiful engagement ring.

"Congratulations," Hermione said, eyes tearing up.

Her friend smiled. "Don't start bawling, Hermione, or else I won't be able to stop either," she said before pressing a kiss to her daughter's forehead. "You have to be happy on this day!"

"Oh, but I am happy!" Hermione exclaimed. "I just... I can't even describe how I feel right now. I have my sons, I have my health, and now I have the man that I love. What more could I ask for?" she asked brightly.

"How about to not be late to your own wedding?" asked Harry from her doorway. He and Ron stepped into the room and wolf-whistled when they saw her in her wedding dress. "You look beautiful, Mione!" he said, kissing her on her cheek.

"Yes you do," said Ron, kissing the other side of her face. "Are you ready to go? I think we're already a few minutes late," he said.

Hermione nodded and grabbed a bouquet of red roses mixed with tiny white flowers. "Did you check in on my boys?" she asked Harry.

He nodded. "They're already in their seats. They're happy that they didn't have to be in the wedding."

"I know. Draco and I decided that since they had participated in your wedding, they could get a break from ours. They didn't really fancy the idea of wearing those 'penguin suits' again," Hermione replied with a small laugh.

As they walked out and towards the back doors of the huge villa, Hermione spotted the dinner table and was glad that it was all set for their guests and for after the wedding. She could catch a scent of food from the kitchen and was amazed at how wonderful everything smelled. As they approached the back doors, Hermione's eyes landed on where the ceremony would take place.

Though the lands were massive and filled with green grass, and trees, Narcissa had brought in cherry blossom trees to surround the guest chairs and where she and Draco would be standing. There were various stone pillars in parallel lines, and from the pillars, white curtains were hanging, billowing gently with the breeze. The guests were already seated in white chairs and they were surrounded with petals falling from the cherry blossom trees. Everything looked beautiful, but her eyes were riveted to Draco, who was standing at the very end of it all.

He looked so handsome in a black, tailored suit. His shirt and tie matched the color of her dress, and he had just trimmed his hair slightly shorter than she had ever seen it. He looked even more handsome than she had ever remembered seeing him. Her heart felt as if it were ready to jump out of her chest. She wasn't nervous, but she was just about ready to explode from pure happiness.

Harry gave her arm a squeeze and wrapped it around his own. He would be the one to give her away, while Ron would be her witness, and Pansy would be Draco's. Blaise would hold the rings for Draco, since he was his best friend. They would walk together down the aisle first, followed Ron and Pansy, then Lucius and Narcissa, Hermione's mother and Fred and George Weasley—who had volunteered to walk her down the aisle, and then Harry and Hermione would follow. Molly and Arthur Weasley were watching over the children. Hermione and Draco had agreed in inviting a few more people, and they consisted of Neville, Parvati, Padma, the other two Weasley brothers, and Fleur, Crabbe, Goyle, and Millicent.

As a beautiful classical wedding march began, Hermione smiled and looked at Harry as he returned it. He was so happy for her that he couldn't even express it. His best friend was finally getting the happiness she deserved. She had waited so long, and suffered so much, that she deserved all the happiness she could get. Judging by the look on her face now, she was almost overwhelmed by her own wedding. She really did look beautiful in her gown. He hoped with all his heart that Malfoy knew how to take advantage of the second chance that life was giving him to her make Hermione happy. He handed her over to Malfoy once they reached the end of the isle, and gave the other man a warning look that he understood perfectly. Don't hurt her or I'll hurt you.

Hermione kissed Harry's cheek and he squeezed her hand before walking away to sit next to his own wife. Draco turned Hermione to face him as the Minister began to give his speech of love, faithfulness, and their vows of loyalty. She wanted so much to pay attention to what was being said, but her eyes and attention were all for Draco, nothing else mattered in that moment.

"May I have the rings?" asked the Minister.

Blaise handed them over to Draco. Though they had discussed the idea to keep their old rings from their first marriage, Hermione had wanted to get something new, something that they could both pick together. Instead of throwing out their old rings, they had had them melded together to the new rings. Luckily, they were of the same silver, but the designs were completely different. As the man kept up his speech, Draco slipped the old and the new ring onto Hermione's finger, and then she did the same to him.

When the ceremony was finally over, and she was finally Hermione Malfoy once again, Draco kissed her passionately, mindful of those who were present and that his sons were sitting there on the front row as well. When they pulled away, there were various happy cheers and clapping and their friends and family approached to congratulate them.

Harry and Ron approached Draco as he watched Hermione being engulfed in many hugs. "I don't think we need to warn you to take good care of her, but we'll do it anyway," said Harry.

"Yeah, don't ever make her sad again unless you want to meet our fists again," said Ron, glaring at Draco slightly. "I may not love her that way anymore, but she's still the girl that I grew up with and I will defend her at any cost necessary."

Draco eyed them both and nodded. "Hermione is lucky to have you both," he muttered only loud enough for the three of them to hear. "You won't ever hear me say it again. Now, run along and threaten someone else," he said with a smirk.

The two ex-Gryffindors stared the ex-Slytherin down for a moment longer before they walked off to engulf Hermione into a tight hug. Draco looked down and smiled when he spotted Darius and Darien running towards him. "Poppa?" asked Darien.

"Yes, son?"

"Are you going to be living with us now?" asked the blond boy.

Draco nodded and picked up each boy in one arm. In a few months he wouldn't be able to handle them that way, since they were both getting bigger by the week. He was just happy that

he had been present to see them growing up from the beginning. He would make fine men out of them if it was the last thing he did. "Your mother and I are married now, so we are all going to be living together." Both boys hugged him around the neck happily. "Say, how would you two like living in this house for a little bit?"

Darius nodded quickly, gray eyes wide. "Darien and me saw some squirrels in the front yard. Can we have some dogs?" he pleaded.

"I want a big dog!" said Darien, opening his arms wide.

Draco chuckled at his sons and nodded. "We'll see. First we need to talk to your mother about living here. Then we'll ask her if we can get some dogs. But remember that for a few days your mum and I are going to take a little vacation and you will be staying with your uncle Harry and Pansy, okay?"

The boys nodded and remembered the conversation both their mother and father had shared with them. Though they were barely at the age of three, both children had great memories and were able to understand better than most children their age. They also loved their uncle Harry and aunt Pansy very much, so it had been easier to convince them to stay with them.

"Come along boys," said Draco, motioning for his wife to take one of their sons in her arms. "It's time for dinner," he said as everyone began to walk into the villa.

Hermione smiled at her husband and felt a great sense of relief now that they were together again. She just hoped that she was able to make him happy the way he had promised to do for her. She wanted things to work out for the better, and knowing now that they had to have a child or at least conceive one before the two years were over, she knew they would do it. They had talked about spending a year together, without a new baby so that they could enjoy their marriage as much as possible. Besides, the older the twins, the better.

By the time the guests left and Harry and Pansy took the twins, it was nearly two in the morning in Venice time. Hermione was completely tired, but she knew that she couldn't just fall asleep on Draco, even though the bed was soft and beckoning her to just lie back from her propped up position and fall asleep. She watched Draco as he stepped into the master bedroom, which was different from the one she had used to change in. He pulled off his coat and tie, then began to unbutton his shirt as she watched silently.

"Did you have a good time?" he asked, pulling off his shoes and then his pants.

Hermione nodded and pulled off the pin holding her hair back. Her shoes were long gone, and all that remained was her dress. He crawled up the bed and settled next to her, reaching over to touch her gently. He slid a hand up her smooth back and leaned forward to kiss her. He had missed kissing her just as much as he had missed holding her, but that didn't matter now. She was finally there with him and his life was complete.

Her fingers slid through his short, silky hair and then moved down, dragging lightly over his neck and down his bare shoulders. His own hands moved to slide down the zipper of her dress low on her bum and then he helped her slide out of the gown, letting it drop carelessly to the floor as they wrapped up in each others arms.

Her skin was like silk under his finger tips and every noise that fell from her lips at his touch made his nerves stand on end. He had always thought that no woman would ever change him, but he had been proved wrong time and time again by the same person. He had been a selfish pig when he had forced her to marry him the first time, but she had taught him that the world didn't revolve around him. He had learned to listen and to think before acting impulsively. He had learned to care for her and his sons above himself. He liked to think that he had become a better man thanks to her.

Though they had both been at fault for the end of their first marriage, they had accepted it and had moved on. They had forgiven each other, and now they were married once again. Draco was distracted by the feel of her lips on a particularly sensitive spot on his neck. From that moment on, he took his time in memorizing her body all over again. He didn't want to rush anything after not having her for more than three years, almost four.

Her kisses matched his in intensity and her touch was just as desperate as his by the time he made their bodies one. She strained against him sweetly, her hands running over his body and setting him on fire as their lips met again. Then they reached their release together, breathing fast, and shivering against each other. Draco pressed his forehead to hers and smirked in satisfaction. "I missed that."

Hermione managed a breathless laugh and nodded. "Me too."

"There was something that I was meaning to tell you," he said, moving to her side and wrapping her in his arms.

"What was that?" she asked, running her lips over his collarbone.

"I suppose we won't be getting any sleep tonight," he said in a husky tone. "But I wanted to ask you if you would be inclined to spend more time in your new home?"

Hermione stopped touching him and lifted her head to look him in the eyes. "What are you talking about? What new home?"

Draco motioned to the room they were in. "I bought this villa for you. We can use this as a vacation spot if you wish, but I wanted to know if you would be willing to spend a few months here, with the boys."

"You bought us a house? Well, more than a house, it's a Manor in its own right, but you really bought this place for us?" she asked with a happy smile.

He nodded and moved his head up to kiss her once more. "If you wish, we can get established here. We can have our future children here, raise our family here. But only if you wish to."

"Will you give me some time to think about it?" she asked before leaning forward to run her lips over his jaw.

"Of course. But what should we do while you think about it?" he asked, closing his eyes when she nuzzled his neck.

Hermione smiled to herself. "I can think of a few things," she whispered before kissing him again.

1 year and 5 months later.....

Hermione wrapped the thick shawl Molly Weasley had knitted for her as her most recent Christmas present and enjoyed the sight of the city from the second floor terrace. She and Draco had opted to continue living in Venice, and had stayed there from the night of their wedding. They had brought her mother over to live with them, and she watched over the twins whenever Hermione had business to attend to back in London.

The magical creature medical center was now fully resting in Neville's hands, but whenever he needed the help, Hermione was happy to give it to him. Lucius and Narcissa visited them often along with little Darlene, who loved her nephews with all her heart, and had proved that she didn't mind playing in the mud, much to her mother's chagrin.

Hermione sighed to herself and realized that the sun had already set while she stood outside with her thoughts. Though she and Draco had their ups and downs just about anything inane, she was happy. They had a good marriage, and their sons were growing up healthy and happy. They had come so far from what they had been in the beginning of their first marriage.

"You shouldn't be out here. It's getting cold," said Draco from behind her.

She turned to look at him and smiled slightly. "It wasn't that cold when I came out here. Besides, I have this warm shawl that Molly made for me. It really does keep out the cold," she said, watching him as he approached her.

"Why can't you understand that I don't want either of you to be in harms way?" he asked, turning her around so that he could press her back to his chest in order for his hands to rest on the slight bulge of her stomach. "Has she kicked at all today?"

Hermione nodded. "When she's hungry, it doesn't matter if I'm nauseous, I have to eat," she said with a faint smile. "But for the last few minutes, she's kept still. I think she recognized your voice."

"Good," murmured Draco as he rubbed her stomach in soothing circles. "Let's just enjoy this peace and quiet before the twins decide to break it. They've been fighting each other for every single toy all day," he said with a tired sigh.

"It's just a phase and they'll get over it. We just need to be patient," Hermione said, placing her hands over his.

"Mum!" came a high-pitched whine from their bedroom. "Darien keeps poking me!"

Hermione let out a heavy sigh and turned to her sons as they raced out onto the terrace, bickering and calling each other names. "Quiet! The both of you," she said in her best mother-voice. Draco was impressed. "I have had it with the arguing and the name calling. If you don't behave, we are going to stop going into the city every morning. Do you want to be stuck here at home all day, doing your homework?" she asked them.

The boys fell quiet for a long moment. Then they each wrapped themselves around one of her legs and held on for dear life. "We're sorry mum!" Cried Darius.

"We'll be good!" said Darien, giving her big puppy-dog eyes.

Hermione smiled in satisfaction. "Draco, help me lift them up here on the banister," she said. She wouldn't have dreamed of trying to lift either of the twins up herself, not unless she wanted Draco to flip out for putting their daughter in danger. Once the boys were sitting there, facing them, Hermione kissed them each on the forehead. "We love you boys very, very much, but all the fighting has to stop," she said to them. Draco watched her and stepped back.

"But Darien started it—"

"And Darius was being a jerk—"

"I don't want to hear it," said Hermione in a firm tone. "You both are brothers and I don't like it when you fight. It makes me sad. Do you want me and your little sister to be sad?" she asked them.

"No," said the twins in unison, looking guilty.

Hermione hid a smile. "Okay. Now will you promise me that instead of fighting with each other you will come to your father or me for help?"

A "Yes," and an, "Okay," were the happy answers she received. "We love you mummy!" they said in unison again, wrapping her in a double hug. It was amazing to Hermione how well they echoed each other. Draco joined them and wrapped them all in his arms, mindful of the little being that was still in the process of growing inside her mother's womb.

"I love you too, boys," Hermione said, pressing kisses on cheeks, chins, and noses. "And your little sister is happy that you won't make her sad anymore."

"How about you guys go get ready for bed? Tomorrow morning we can go have breakfast in the city, all right?" Draco asked them before setting the kids down again.

The twins ran off to do as they were told and they left their parents alone again. Draco wrapped his arms around Hermione and kissed her soundly. "You need to get some rest too," he said, running a hand over her stomach again.

She was only five months pregnant, but he treated her as if she were almost at the end of her pregnancy. He didn't let her get her own food, or allowed her to clean. He barely even let her get out of bed. She wasn't incapacitated, for Merlin's sake, but she had to admit that she was getting tired faster than usual. "I'm feeling perfectly fine," Hermione complained as she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Now stop being so overprotective."

"Are you happy with me, Hermione?" he asked her.

Hermione thought about it for a moment and laughed when his eyes narrowed. "Of course I am. You've made good on your promise of never hurting me again. We have our sons, we almost have our daughter, and we have ourselves. What more can I ask for?"

Draco smiled at her words and nodded. "How about you ask me for another kiss?"

Hermione smiled and parted her lips to humor him, but then he was kissing her, proving that she didn't even have to ask. She was so happy. There was no more hate. She didn't think that she would be able to ever hate him again. She remembered that her whole life had flashed before her when she had married him the first time, well, now her life was flashing before her, but not because she was having a near death experience or anything of the sort, but because she loved Draco so much it was near overwhelming. Her life was complete and she couldn't have asked for a better man and a better family.

The End

22 Chapters

137, 925 Words Total-Including A/N's

1587 Reviews before last update

153, 796 Hits before last update

Chapter 12- Most reviewed chapter with 106

Chapter 3- Least reviewed chapter with 32

Woohooooo! It's over! I can't believe that it's over! Even though it's sad that this fic is finally at an end, I'm happy that I got this far with it. I know it took me forever, almost a year and two months, but I have officially completed another fic. Now, about the Bridge of Sighs, it has two stories. One is the true one of prisoners sighing as they crossed the bridge because it was the last sunlight they would see before going to prison, and the second would be the love one. That if you kissed as you passed under the bridge, you would be with the person forever. I looked it up on Wiki and I'm assuming that it's true. Also, the villas in Venice are now used mostly as museums for people to see or something of the like, so Draco buying the villa for them was a piece of fiction.

I want to thank every single person who ever reviewed this story. I'm sorry that I can't name each and every one of you, but just know that you have my thanks and best wishes for making this story any kind of success. All of your reviews always made me so happy, even those with the death threats and the ones saying that they wanted to kill Hermione. Hey, even those who said that the fic was becoming a little annoying, I was with you, but I changed things for you all, because without you, I never would've completed this story.

Moving on to something else, I put a note up in my bio page concerning my incomplete fics. I'm sorry to say that with the end of this story, I will be taking an indefinite break. Please don't kill me, or really try to hunt me down, but I need the break. I'm totally in love with the Final Fantasy VII fandom right now, and most of my inspiration is there. I just really wanted to finish this story for all of you wonderful people. I'm sorry if I disappoint many of you, but I can't guarantee when or if I will return to my two incomplete fics. Once again I'm sorry, and I want to thank you all for making me who I am, and for loving my fics so much. I wish you all the best and I hope that all of you don't hate me. Have fun and those of you still in the fandom writing and reading, good luck with your current or future fics!

Byebye

!Joey!

P.S. Dunno what's up with the site, but it ate all of the page divisions I had put in for all my fics and other people's fics too. I wonder why... Bye!